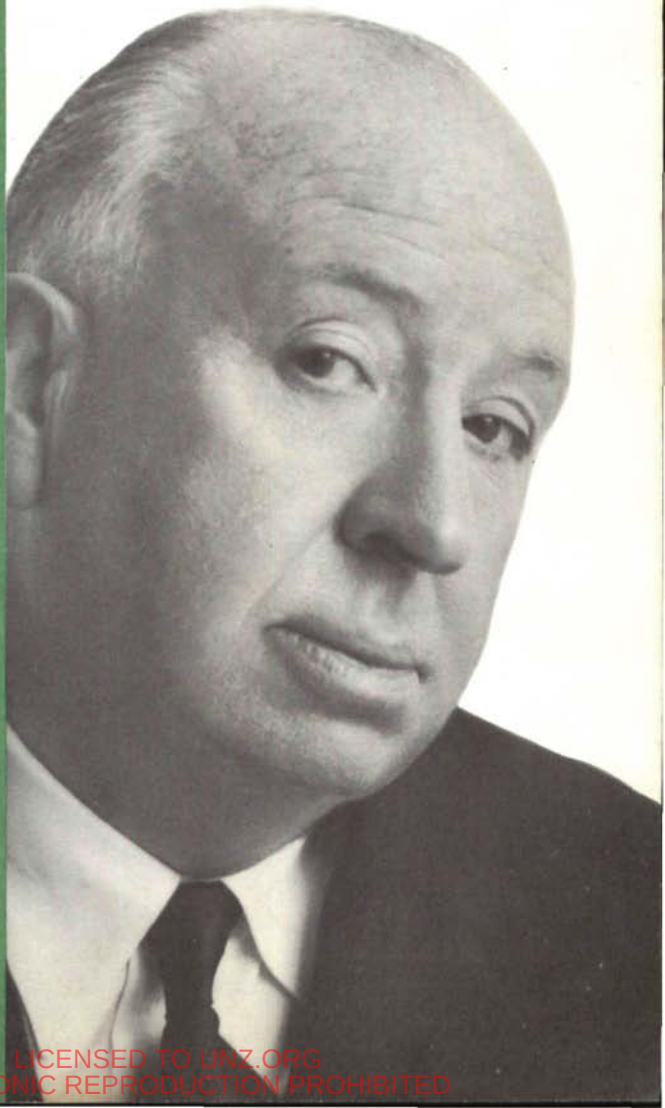
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ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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November 1967

Dear Reader:

A brisk daily walk is touted for keeping oneself fit, but tramping in the country at this time of year may have an opposite effect. Hunters are on the march, and somewhere someone will be taken for a deer or a rabbit or a duck. The luckless one may be attired entirely in red, and vociferous, but the potshot will testify that red talking deer or rabbits or ducks are quite commonplace.

I am not sure it is significant, but I have a friend who safely continues his hikes through the fall while garbed in brown, with a hatrack strapped to his back, his nose wiggling and his arms flapping.

Perhaps the difficulty began when the nation was emerging and redcoats were in season. Whatever, I myself keep body and soul intact by hunting at the butcher's.

Speaking of butchers, it is more than likely that an impressive number of them will be encountered forthwith if you but turn the page. Then, on Halloween, a copy of this issue in each little trickster's bag will provide a meaty treat for Mom and Dad.

Alfred Hitchcock

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As one-way glass can obscure the viewer, so can that which appears obvious obvert to translucence.



by Helen Nielsen

It was almost two a.m. when Claudia Shane eased away from the last dedicated group of celebrants at the Solimar Point Country Club bar and, on the pretext of visiting the powder room, made her way to the locked door of the executive office. Claudia was thirty-one, slender and elegantly poised. She rapped smartly on the door and it opened from within.

There were two men in the room: Pete Kelly, a chubby, white-haired Irish cherub with bright pink cheeks, who was holding a black attache case clutched tightly to his dinner jacket, and Alex Ward, who was leading-man handsome and as

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instantly aware of Claudia's entry as if their psyches were connected by electric wires.

Pete Kelly was leaving. Waving the attache case as he neared Claudia, he crowed, "How about that? Alex stages the annual Founder's Day brawl and we come out three hundred bucks in the black! First time in the annals of the organization. The man's a bloody genius!"

"Are you just becoming aware of that?" Claudia chided. "Goodnight, Peter, dear."

She eased him through the doorway with the grace of a queen dismissing an unwanted caller who would forever believe that his departure had broken her heart. Then she locked the door and turned to meet Alex, fitting into his arms as if they were home.

"Claudia, it's been too long!" he said.

"Only two weeks," she answered.

"Two centuries! Don't ever do that to me again. No more separations—trial or otherwise."

"You're sold, then?"

"You know it! You must have known months before you went to Palm Springs."

"But now we're both certain, aren't we?"

She stepped back and let him gaze at her, confident that he could see only what pleased him. She had picked up a tan at the spa, and it was strikingly set off by a simple dinner sheath that had come off the rack in one of the local shops. A woman with style had no need of an expensive couturier. Widowed at twenty-six, Claudia Shane had carried on with her husband's insurance brokerage and prospered with the Solimar Point boom. Energies that might have gone into homemaking and childbearing had blossomed in another direction, but not at the expense of femininity.

"Now that we've eliminated the last doubt," she added, "there's only one question left. When are you going to marry me?"

"Soon," Alex said.

"Darling, I hate to be forward but there's so little time! I've missed too much of life. So have you. I want to marry you now and live with you, and make love with you with the doors unlocked and the drapes open—"

"You're shameless," Alex scolded.

"About some things, yes. When, Alex?"

Alex feigned interest in his wristwatch, then exclaimed, "It's after two! I've been trying all evening to have five minutes alone with you, and now I have to go out to the office and close up

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shop. The caterers were paid only until two-thirty. I mustn't lose that precious profit. How about lunch tomorrow?"

Claudia protested, "I'm serious, Alex. It has to be soon or we close the doors. I'm not the Back Street type."

"Tomorrow at one. Same place. We'll set dates. I promise."

Claudia left the office. Alex waited five minutes, then followed. The ballroom was deserted now. The brilliant jazz combo the Founder's Club board of directors had whined so about importing from London were packing up their instruments and preparing to depart. They had been a bit too riotous for the old establishment group, but executives were coming younger these days and the portion that remained was the group that had drained the bar of its private stock and thus turned the annual ball into a profit making function. It was simple logic. Alex Ward had made one million dollars in the past five years by using simple logic and hard-nosed driving power. There was no luck involved. It was good judgment, good timing and hutzba. It was the art of being a perfectionist.

It was also because he had inherited, through marriage, the management of Harry Dragerman's realty business when the old man died five years ago, and that left one severe drawback to Alex's enjoyment of his well-deserved affluence: his wife, Phyllis.

When the ballroom was completely cleared, Alex signaled the janitors to clean up and then walked out to the parking lot. The combo's van, a service truck, and his own car were all that remained to give evidence of a successful evening. Alex went to his sedan and slid in behind the steering wheel. Phyllis, swathed in mink, was curled up in the back seat. She raised up and blinked at the panel light.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

Her voice was a familiar whine. "I slept some," she said, "but I'm chilled through."

"I told you to call a cab and go home."

"Alone—at night? You know how nervous I've been since that Dorrit girl was strangled on the beach."

"That was two miles away and nearly a month ago," Alex said.

"But the police haven't made an arrest. Alex, why were you so long? You knew I had a headache."

Alex started the motor and drove out of the parking lot. There was no traffic at this level. What was still awake and lighted

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in the Point was spread out below them as they rolled toward the highland estates. This was land Harry Dragerman had leased out for pasture until Alex took over the business and turned it into prime white-water-view residential lots. As he drove, Alex watched Phyllis in the rear view mirror. She was terribly pale, and her face had become quite puffy with the passing years. In spite of the mink—and the Parisian gown beneath it—she was dowdy. She had never been a great beauty, but she had been cute and uncomplicated. But life wasn't uncomplicated. Now that he was a successful man, Alex wanted a more meaningful companionship with a woman. Deep down inside, Phyllis was still Harry Dragerman's little girl, and nothing was more irritating than a thirty-five year old teen-ager.

"I thought Dr. Kuperman said those headaches were cured," Alex said. "Psychosomatic and cured. God knows we paid him enough!"

"Let's not talk about it," Phyllis said. "I'll be all right as soon as I've had a hot bath. It was the crowd and that awful music—"

"It's the best beat of the day."

"I know. You're always right about business things, Alex."

Pathetic. Claudia had fruged with the best of them, but if she hadn't liked the group she would have told him so with no qualifications. There was no challenge left in Phyllis. She was as dated as the business concepts that had kept her father on the edge of survival for fifty professional years.

"Phyllis," he said abruptly, "I think Kuperman is right. Those headaches are psychosomatic—and I know why. It's our marriage. It's just not working out. Let's be civilized and call it quits."

He knew how Phyllis would react. She was completely predictable.

"Alex, no! Not that again," she begged.

"Why not? We know it's true. Divorce me, Phyllis. You'll feel wonderful!"

Phyllis drew the mink closer about her face. She was weak, clinging, adolescent and deadly, because she held the winning cards and knew how to play them.

"It's Claudia Shane, isn't it? That's why you kept me sitting in the car so long. You were with her. I saw her come out—"

"Phyllis, leave Mrs. Shane out of this. It's between you and me!"

The pale face in Alex's rear view mirror smiled knowingly.

"All right, then. If it's just between you and me, I'll give you the divorce," Phyllis said, "but that's all I'll give you. Absolutely

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all. Is that sufficiently clear?"

Alex's grip tightened on the steering wheel. His foot bore lower on the accelerator. They were climbing too fast, as if he could run away from that nasal whine in the back seat.

"I know you think it's unfair," she said. "You did make the fortune—but with the business I inherited from Papa. It's still mine, Alex—"

"Phyllis, shut up!" Alex said.

"You know it is. You know the law. Can you make another million, Alex? Are you sure Claudia will want you if you can't? Are you sure you can fit into her sophisticated world without a bankroll?"

"Phyllis, if you don't shut up—" Alex threatened—and then Phyllis screamed. Instinctively, Alex' foot found the brake pedal. They had swung around the curve and picked up a flashing red light in the headlight beams, then an ambulance jutting out from a wide driveway, and a big man in a leather coat who planted himself in the path of the sedan as it lurched to a stop.

"Alex Ward?" the man called out. "Is that you?"

It was Captain Jimmy Collins of the Solimar Point Police Department. He came to the side of the car and poked his face in the open window, his teeth clenched.

"You damned near hit my police car, Alex," he said. "I should run you in for reckless driving, but I don't have time. You just pull around the ambulance easy and go on home."

The ambulance was now bathed with light. The rear doors were open and a couple of white-garbed attendants came out of the driveway bearing a covered stretcher.

"This is the Sandersons' house," Phyllis said. "What's happened, Captain?"

Collins hesitated. He was a tight-lipped professional, and it was obvious that he didn't appreciate having his operation observed by unofficial callers. However, the stretcher was too close to be ignored. Then, to cement the situation, a lanky, hatless man wearing a battered trenchcoat and fogged bifocals emerged from the driveway and tapped the captain's right shoulder.

"All vacuumed and fingerprinted," he announced in a nasal voice. "Doubt if we have much more to go on than we did in the Dorrit case, but look in at the lab in a couple of hours to make sure."

"The Dorrit Case?" Phyllis echoed.

"Ennis, shut up!" Collins ordered.

It was too late. The lanky man

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was Wesley Ennis, who constituted the one-man crime lab at Solimar Point Police Station. He was a man who loved his work; a crime buff who had lectured before the Founder's Club and every other organization within a radius of fifty miles that would have him.

His presence at the Sandersons' could mean only one thing, and it was Collins who told the story. The Sandersons had returned from the Founder's Ball to find Angie Parsons, their seventeen year old baby sitter, dead. She had been strangled with one of her own silk stockings—a repeat of the technique used on the Dorrit girl in the beach house murder.

Phyllis began to whimper in the back seat, and this time Alex couldn't scold her. He was feeling exactly what she was feeling: icy fear.

Ennis took a piece of pale blue tissue from his pocket, removed his glasses, and wiped them clean. His curly, steel gray hair was damp with fog, and his shoulders hunched against the chill. Having cleaned the glasses, he replaced them and smothered a yawn.

"Don't know why murderers usually strike at such ungodly hours," he said. "See you later, Captain."

As Ennis started to cross in front of the sedan's headlight beams, a shout came from the dark driveway, followed by a shot and the sound of running feet.

"Stop him! Stop that man!"

At that moment, a slender male figure in tight denim trousers and leather jacket dashed into the arc of light. Temporarily blinded, he stood pinioned by shock. Ennis seemed paralyzed, but Collins' reaction was automatic. He blocked the fugitive with a low tackle and sent him sprawling back into the arms of the pursuing officer.

Snaking free, the runaway yelled, "I haven't done anything! I haven't done anything wrong!"

He was only a boy, wild now with terror. He clawed his way toward the sedan and grabbed hold of the door next to Alex with clutching gloved hands.

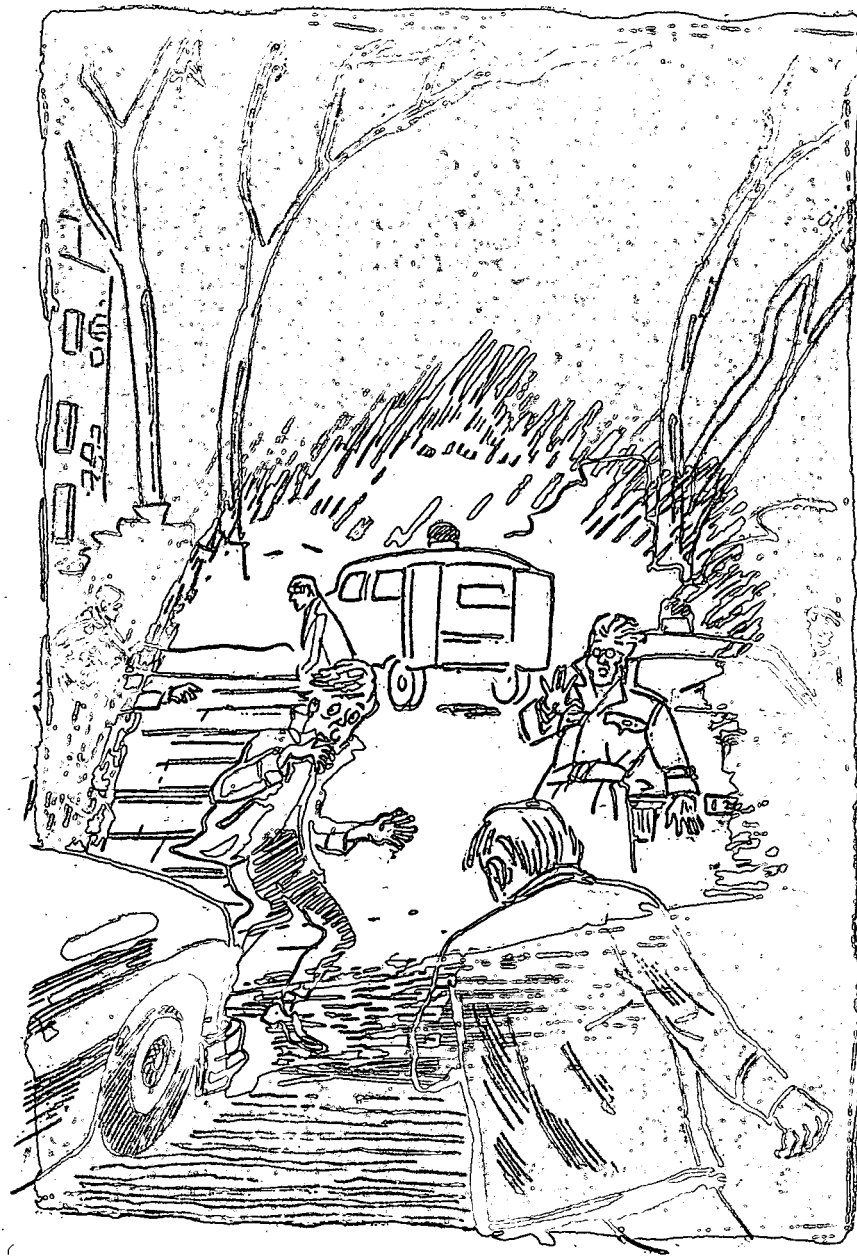
"We found him in the garage," the officer said.

"I was asleep. I was cold. The garage was open so I went in and fell asleep. Then I heard sirens—Mister, help me! I didn't steal anything! I didn't hurt anybody! Help me, Mister, please—"

Collins yanked the suspect loose from the sedan and buried him in a blanket of lawmen, but not before Alex Ward had a good look at the face of the man who was going to set him free.

A civilized society must be

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based on law. Captain Collins was aware of that but, like all good law officers, gnashed his teeth at the shackling restrictions of the courts. The leather-jacketed prowler called himself Arne Farmer. He carried a thin wallet containing twelve dollars which, he claimed, was what was left of his last paycheck from a temporary job at a hamburger stand at the beach. The job was over. Politics, he said, which Jimmy Collins translated as emotional instability. Farmer was a drifter. He gave his home as San Diego and claimed to be an orphan. He could offer no local references, and Collins was well on his way to a confession when Alex Ward appeared at the Police Station in a surprising role.

Prior to marrying Harry Dragerman's realty business, Ward had taken the time and trouble to pick up a law degree. As the member of several civic organizations, he announced that he felt duty bound to see that the suspect received adequate legal advice.

While Collins fumed, Wesley Ennis emerged from the laboratory and looked on with bemused interest. He had traded the trench coat for a white linen jacket, and his eyes were owlishly large behind the thick lenses of his spectacles.

"Mr. Ward," he said, "I didn't realize that a man of your stature took such an interest in justice. I thought you were only concerned with making money."

"There's nothing wrong with making money," Alex said.

"No, there isn't. Unfortunately, neither the captain nor myself have much experience in that field, but our work does have compensations. The captain, naturally, is interested in an arrest and a conviction. The force of public opinion falls on him if he doesn't deliver miracles. But my interest is purely scientific: evidence. I'm sorry to say, Captain, that we have no evidence. I found no fingerprints in the house, no lint from Farmer's clothing, not even any of the dirt his boots picked up in the garage where he was found."

Alex Ward weighed Ennis' words. "Then it's Arne Farmer's statement against—"

"Circumstance," Ennis said.

"Then no formal charge."

"Not without a confession," Collins sighed, "and he's guilty as hell. I'm sure of it. He admits to being in the area for a month. He worked at the beach where he could have seen the Dorrit girl promenading in her bikini—"

"Jeanne Dorrit wasn't raped," Ennis said quickly.

"Was the Parsons girl?" Alex asked.

"No."

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"Still," Alex reflected, "it's a sex crime, isn't it? I mean, the use of the girl's stocking—"

"You are observant," Ennis remarked. "You probably noticed, too, that Farmer was wearing gloves when he grabbed hold of your car tonight. Even so, there's still no evidence to put him inside the Sanderson house, and that leaves the captain handcuffed. Farmer will go free."

"To kill again," Collins muttered.

"Very likely," Ennis said. "If he is the strangler, he will kill again. It's a compulsion. Not a pleasant thought for realty values, is it, Mr. Ward?"

"It's not a pleasant thought for the ladies of Solimar Point," Alex answered.

Ennis was right. Arne Farmer was held for three days until his statements could be verified and his fingerprints checked out of Washington. He was clean, no record of arrests of any kind. Lacking a confession, Captain Collins had no choice but to release his suspect, with an admonition to put distance between himself and Solimar Point. He drove Farmer to the bus depot to be placed on the first bus for San Diego; but there Collins was met by Alex Ward, who had telephoned the police station and learned of the captain's plans. He had given the matter of Arne Farmer some thought, he explained, and it didn't seem fair to the boy, or to the community, to hustle him out of town that way with so little hope of a productive future.

"Farmer's been printed and mugged," he explained, "and I'll wager you've alerted the San Diego police that he's on his way. The minute he tries to get a job, a check will be run on his background and he'll get a fast brush. Who will hire a suspected murderer?"

"So what do I do?" Farmer challenged. "Commit suicide?"

"I helped you the night you were arrested," Alex said, "and I still feel responsible. I've got a new property development opening up a couple of miles up in the hills. Construction's hung up in this tight money squeeze, but the field office is completed and the electricity and water are connected. I need a watchman. How would bed, board and fifty dollars a week strike you? The job's yours as long as you can hold it. By that time Captain Collins may have caught the strangler and you'll be really clean."

"You're taking a big chance," Collins warned.

Alex drew Collins aside. "Isn't it better to know where Farmer is

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as long as he's still suspect? Incriminating evidence may turn up, and San Diego's awfully close to the Mexican border."

Viewing the situation in that light, Collins agreed. As for Farmer, he had no choice. He was transferred from the police car to Ward's, and Alex drove to the new development. Farmer liked the big sedan. He stretched out his legs and stared at his boots for a few minutes and then began poking through his pockets for a pack of cigarettes. Alex offered his own open case with a crisp new fifty dollar bill folded inside the cover.

"Go ahead, take it," he said. "It's not marked."

"What's it for?" Farmer hedged.

"An advance on your salary, but I advise you not to go back into town to spend it. Feeling's running high about those murders."

Satisfied, Farmer took the bill and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. He then took a cigarette from the case and got his light from the instrument panel, and this act brought his eyes in line with a chrome nameplate proclaiming: This car was made for Alex Ward.

Farmer emitted a high-pitched laugh. "Alex Ward—big shot!" he said. "Now that the fuzz is gone, why don't you tell me what this is really all about?"

"Would you like a matched set of twenty of these fifty dollar bills?" Alex asked. "And a good job with a construction outfit in South America?"

"What happens if I don't like it?"

"Nothing—unless somebody fans up the hotheads in the Point and they come up to the construction office some night to make sure there are no more stocking murders."

After that, Alex and Arne Farmer had a perfect understanding. The construction office contained a hot plate, a cot and blankets, and enough canned goods to keep Farmer out of circulation for at least a week. It would take that long, Alex explained, to arrange for an air ticket to South America and a passport. The boy understood and seemed willing to follow directions, and Alex's only fear, as he drove back to the Point, was that the fifty dollar bill might be too hot for Farmer's jacket pocket until it was time for the strangler to strike again.

The Red Sails was a smart bar and dining room adjacent to the new marina. Claudia's sport car was parked on the lot when Alex arrived. He hurried inside and found her waiting in their usual booth with their usual cocktails. He glanced at his watch. It was,

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oddly enough, exactly five o'clock.

"I am here, as promised," he said.

"And a good thing, too," Claudia remarked. "You stood me up for lunch. That sort of thing bruises the ego."

"But you know why that happened. It was that mess at the Sandersons'. Ran right into the worst of it on the way home from the country club."

Claudia knew about it, of course. The papers and airwaves were full of it, and Rumorsville had been working three shifts.

"They let the suspect go," she said. "I feel creepy. Think I'll buy a Great Dane or something for protection."

"Don't," Alex said. "I've already applied for the job as protector."

"Any references?"

"The best."

"Alex, really? Did Phyllis finally—"

"Yes, Phyllis finally agreed to the divorce. Now, drink your drink like a nice bride-to-be. Everything's being arranged."

She was Claudia, and Claudia was too sophisticated to cry, but her eyes were moist and her voice had dropped at least an octave when she said, "How? When? I mean, how did you do it, darling?"

"I'm magic," Alex said. "Seriously, Phyllis just decided to agree that we're both civilized people, and civilized people don't deliberately destroy one another. She took it rather well, as a matter of fact. You understand, of course, that she keeps the house, and there'll be a settlement. Anyone who has put up with me for fifteen years deserves more than a pat on the head."

"Alex, how can you say that? She was the one who was so ugly about the divorce!"

Alex leaned across the table and silenced her with a kiss. "Grudges get heavy," he said. "To a new life?"

They touched glasses and Alex watched her drink. He had no need of stimulation. Something electric had started generating the moment he took Arne Farmer off the bus. It was exciting, like opening a new development, or watching a sleeper stock take off and soar. For the rest of the evening he would enjoy Claudia, listen to her and converse with her, but the creative part of his mind would be checking and rechecking his plan for any possible bugs. There was nothing morbid in this. Phyllis had already become an inanimate object. She existed only as the central character in the soon-to-be presented drama of her death.

On the following afternoon, Al-

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ex appeared at the police station to register a snub-nosed .38 calibre handgun. Captain Collins was in the office, and his reaction left nothing to the imagination.

"Now, why did a sensible man like you have to buy this silly private eye pistol?" he demanded. "Everybody's doing it, but I didn't think you would. Do you have any idea how many people get killed with these household arsenals every year?"

"It was Phyllis' idea," Alex said. "She's been a bundle of nerves since the Parsons girl was killed. That got pretty close to home."

Collins shrugged. "All right, I can't stop you from owning the gun. But I can appeal to your common sense not to be careless with it. Fill out the form."

Alex lied, of course. He already owned a service pistol, but he needed an excuse to return to the police station and remind Collins that Phyllis was nervous about the murder, and that he meant to fulfill his husbandly duty to protect her from harm. He also needed an opportunity to see Wesley Ennis again and make sure the authorities weren't holding back any important data on the strangler's *modus operandi.*

The lab was locked only when Ennis was working on tests. Evidence pertinent to unsolved cases, or cases pending trial, was locked away from prying eyes and damaging fingers. AlPexP found the one-man criminology department poring over an impressive tome which he immediately closed at the welcome sight of a visitor.

Like all men, Ennis had an ego. Alex fed it small, leading tidbits until Ennis unlocked the files on the two recent stranglings and displayed the murder weapon in each —a sheer silk stocking.

"A killer has a signature," he said. "We know the Dorrit girl and the Parsons girl were killed by the same man because of a small detail in technique. We don't know how the girls were initially approached. Perhaps they screamed, but the beach house where the first murder occurred was remote, and the Sanderson house is on a hillside where anyone approaching is usually driving at a good rate of speed, or in low gear."

"And the Sandersons had gone out for the evening," Alex added. "The killer had to know that."

Wesley Ennis scowled at him through those penetrating bifocals. This was his milieu and he intended to direct the dialogue.

"I think that we can assume our killer, lurking on the premises, could make that observation for himself. The Parsons girl lived farther down the hill. Sanderson

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drove down and brought her up to his house at about seven-thirty. There was nothing secretive about it. That's beside the point. Whatever happened before the girls were strangled, and there were bruises to indicate some struggle, the interesting thing is that each girl, while not sexually molested, was stripped of one, and just one, article of clothing: a pair of stockings."

Alex held the evidence in his hand, each of the strangulation nylons carefully protected by a sealed plastic bag.

"You said a *pair* of stockings," he said. "There are only two stockings here."

"Exactly," Ennis responded. "That's one of the reasons Farmer was released. He didn't have the second stocking on him, and Collins' men couldn't find it in Sanderson's garage. We think he has both stockings—maybe more from other crimes we know nothing about—hidden away somewhere. It's a fetish. If so, he'll come back to them. Where do you suppose the cache is, Mr. Ward?"

Alex was uncomfortable. Ennis seemed to enjoy his macabre profession too much, and those owlish eyes had a way of making a man feel his subconscious was showing. "If you're trying to frighten me," Alex said, "don't bother. I'm



already scared to a ghostly white."

Ward smiled thinly. "You should be. Have you ever seen a woman after strangulation? I have some photos here—"

Alex instinctively backed away. Murder was a crime of passion. It should be done in hot blood, with no time to contemplate such consequences as the ghastly distorted face of a victim.

"Not very pretty, are they?" Ennis remarked. "I have quite a collection of these photos. Victims of gunshot, knifing, even ax murders. We live in an age of violence, Mr. Ward. It's in the air, and you know how young people get caught up in trends. To me, the act of strangulation seems the most

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cruel and primitive. Bare hands, as it were. And the victim has time to know what's happening, hence the terror and distortion of the features, as you can see."

"I'm sorry," Alex said quickly. "I have to pick up Mrs. Ward at the medical center."

"So?" Ennis reluctantly put aside the photos. "Nothing serious, I hope."

"All in her imagination. Always is," Alex answered. "You know how women are."

"I'm not married—except to my profession, Mr. Ward. Do come back when you have more time. I have some interesting color slides, very interesting—"

Alex ran two stoplights on his way to the medical center. Ennis either took sadistic delight in shocking people, or was so engrossed in his work he couldn't appreciate other sensibilities. By the time he reached the parking lot, Alex' face was beaded with perspiration and his hands were clammy on the steering wheel. He sat there in the bright afternoon sunlight and tried to think rationally about the subject of murder. He had loved Phyllis once. Old man Dragerman's shabby little realty office hadn't sparked the marriage. He had taken Phyllis for the same reason any man takes a wife. He wanted to be free of her now, but he didn't want to see her looking like those photos in Ennis' file. He could try once more to reach her with persuasion.

Phyllis emerged from Dr. Kuperman's office, scanned the parking lot and then walked toward the car. She was definitely overweight, and had the knack of choosing clothes that accentuated the bovine in her figure, but for the moment Alex was oblivious to these faults. He imagined her as he had seen her fifteen years ago: soft, feminine and in need of manly protection. A wave of forgotten warmth swept over him. He leapt out of the car and held open the door for her entrance.

Phyllis glared at him. "What's the matter with you?" she demanded. "Did the doctor telephone you? Don't get over-mobilized, Alex. I may not drop dead for another forty years. I know how happy you are to hear that."

Alex' illusion dissolved abruptly. "Why should the doctor have called me?" he asked.

"Never mind. If he didn't think my condition was serious enough to tell you, I won't. You can get this prescription filled at the pharmacy on the way home, and don't brake the car so fast that I bounce around in the back seat the way I did the night you almost hit that ambulance. I slipped a disc in my

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back. Alex? Are you listening?"

Alex wasn't. He was thinking of the best way to handle Arne Farmer.

The first step was to make a diagram of the house, showing the location of Phyllis' room and the means of access. Farmer wasn't a mental giant so the plan must be kept simple.

The visit to Ennis' lab had been a disturbing experience, but without it Alex wouldn't have known about the stocking fetish. He selected a pair from Phyllis' dressing room. True to form, she had taken to bed immediately after the visit to Dr. Kuperman. The prescription was for her heart and was kept on the bedside table. Alex encouraged the invalidism; it made her more accessible. In the years since her father's death, Phyllis had imagined herself the victim of almost every known disease and a few not yet diagnosed. One more added to her repertoire of ailments didn't alter his plan.

The important thing was to leave nothing that could be traced back to himself. He took off a day to drive into the Los Angeles International Airport and, on the pretext of being called to the telephone, enlisted another passenger to purchase a one-way ticket to Buenos Aires. He borrowed nineteen fifty dollar bills out of the office safe so no withdrawal would show on his bank account, and then, carrying a small camera, returned to the construction office in the hills.

He found Arne Farmer stretched out on the cot, nursing the dregs of a bottle of soda pop. He had made a paper airplane of the fifty dollar bill and sailed it across his torso while Alex displayed the diagram and explained the plan. At seven-thirty of the following evening, Alex would leave for a regular meeting of the realty board in the Solimar Civic Center. He would make certain the window to the service porch was unlocked. There were no resident servants; Phyllis would be alone. Farmer would go directly to her bedroom (she always kept a night light burning) and do the job as quickly as possible.

Alex produced the stockings. "I bought a pair," he said. "I don't want you poking about after the job's done. You can add the extra to your collection."

Farmer accepted the stockings without comment. He dangled them before his eyes for a moment and then stuffed them into his jacket pocket. "Whatever you say, boss man," he sighed.

"Now sit up and let me snap your picture. I've got an unexpired passport and a friend who can

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doctor it up to fit your description."

Alex was trying to make the setup look genuine, and Farmer had never seen the passport. He examined it closely between poses.

"When do I get the bread?" he demanded.

"Tomorrow night, after you've done the job. I'll leave the meeting at exactly ten o'clock. It takes fifteen minutes for me to drive home. Meet me at ten-fifteen on the rear patio, the one you use to get into the house. I'll give you the money, the passport and ticket, and a head start. I won't discover the body until morning. The police will be told that I rapped on my wife's door when I came home. She didn't answer and so I assumed she was asleep. By the time the third strangulation is reported, you'll be on a plane somewhere over Mexico."

Farmer returned the passport. "I want to see the bread first," he said.

Alex was prepared. He removed a long envelope from his inside coat pocket and let Arne Farmer examine the contents: the nineteen fifty-dollar bills and the ticket. But with Alex' coat open, Farmer caught a glimpse of the handgun in the holster.

"What's the iron for?" he demanded.

"Protection. I'm carrying almost a thousand dollars in cash."

There was an instant when Alex feared Farmer was getting wise. He counted the money carefully and studied the ticket. When Alex held out his hand, Farmer returned the money but retained the envelope and the ticket.

"Just in case you try to cross me," he said.

"Don't be so suspicious, Arne," Alex answered. "I'm helping you and you're helping me. We need each other. Now, let's run over the plan one more time."

When Alex returned to his car, he pocketed the money and locked the passport and camera in the glove compartment. They had served their purpose as props and wouldn't be needed again. He let Farmer keep the ticket, which was useless without the passport, because it gave him a sense of security.

On the following evening, Alex stepped into Phyllis' bedroom before leaving for the meeting. She was propped up in bed with an open box of chocolates in her lap and a confession magazine in her hand. The sight of her roused nothing in him but impatience to get the night's work done.

"I thought you would never come," she whined. "It's time for my medicine and there's no water

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in the carafe. You should hire a nurse for me, Alex. Dr. Kuperman said I shouldn't be left alone."

"Dr. Kuperman should have said that chocolates make fat, and fat's dangerous to anyone with a heart condition," Alex retorted. "He can't be too worried. As for leaving you alone, you do like all that money I make for you, don't you? You must like it or you wouldn't be so reluctant to let me get away with my share."

The needling brought no response. Alex picked up the medicine and stalked into the bathroom, but his nerves were tauter than he realized. The bottle slipped from his hand into the basin, and all of Dr. Kuperman's expensive prescription went rushing down the drain. It was as clear as the water coming from the tap. Alex faked the dosage with a few drops of mouthwash, refilled the bottle from the tap and returned to Phyllis. She took the medicine without protest. Having replaced the bottle on the night table, Alex then left for the meeting.

Alex was better than his word to Arne Farmer. At nine-thirty he excused himself on the grounds of his wife's frail health, and drove home. He cut the headlights and parked a short distance from the house, then walked to the rear patio. There were no lights showing except in Phyllis' room, and the service porch window rattling in the night wind told him that Arne Farmer was already inside the house. He took the handgun from its holster and waited. Action came faster than he expected. He heard a high-pitched yell, and then the rear door burst open and Farmer ran wildly across the patio.

"Farmer!" Alex called. "I'm here!"

The boy whirled about. When he saw Alex he stretched out both hands in a clawing gesture. "Man," he gasped, "give me the bread and the ticket!"

"Is she dead?"

"She's real dead! Look for yourself. Now, give me what's coming to me."

"I will," Alex said, and shot Arne Farmer through the head.

Farmer dropped. Alex leaned over him and felt his pulse until certain that he was dead. The long envelope containing the airline ticket was protruding from one of the leather jacket pockets. Alex transferred it to his own inside coat pocket, then walked into the house and down the hall to Phyllis' room. One glance told him all he needed to know. He went into the den and telephoned Captain Collins.

Later, at the police station, Alex made a full statement. "I left the

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meeting early because my wife was nervous when left alone in the house at night. I drove home and parked beyond my driveway because something was wrong. I had left the patio lights burning. They were off. I walked to the house and approached through the rear patio. There I could see the light in Phyllis' room and the open window on the service porch where Farmer must have entered. I heard a cry and Farmer opened the back door and came running out. He saw me and yelled: 'She's dead! I've killed your wife!' He looked insane, and I guess I went a little crazy too. I shot him."

The police stenographer stopped writing. From behind his desk, Captain Collins faced Alex with an unblinking stare. Ennis, whose eyes were lost behind the reflected light on his bifocals, slouched against the water cooler. Alex sat stiffly in a straight-backed chair. It was Collins who finally spoke.

"I wonder why Farmer said he killed your wife. He must have known she was already dead when he put the stocking around her throat."

"Already dead?" Alex's lips felt dry. He wet them with his tongue. "But that's impossible! I saw—"

"Did you go into your wife's bedroom before you called me?"

"No—" Alex reflected. "I looked in at the door and saw her sprawled over the edge of the bed with a stocking twisted about her neck. I didn't want to touch anything."

"I'm glad you didn't. But that stocking was too loose to strangle anyone, Alex. Your wife died of a heart attack. No wonder Farmer came out of the house yelling. We'll never know for sure, but it's possible she heard him break in, felt an attack coming on and tried to get to her medicine. The cap was found on the bedside table, the bottle on the floor, empty. Dr. Kuperman verified the prescription, but what we can't understand was why the stain on the carpet had no medicinal content. It was just flavored water."

"I can explain that," Alex said. "I accidentally broke Phyllis' medicine bottle before I went to the meeting. It was too late to get the prescription refilled, so I used tap water. I didn't want to worry her, and I didn't dream the stuff was important. She's been a hypochondriac for years."

Collins listened. His expression didn't change, but when Alex was all through he said, "I'll have to take your gun, Alex."

"My gun?"

"I can hold you on the charge of carrying a gun until I get something stronger. That permit I is-

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sued was just a registration, not a license to carry."

Collins stepped forward quickly and peeled back Alex' jacket. He yanked the .38 out of the holster and, with the same motion, flicked the long envelope from Alex' inner pocket. "Now, what have we here?" he said.

Alex didn't confess until after Collins took the ticket out of the envelope. It had a grimy thumbprint on it that made Wesley Ennis' face glow in anticipation, and Alex had no cover story for the evidence Ennis brought back from his lab, or for the exposed film Collins found in the camera in the glove compartment of his car, or for Arne Farmer's fingerprints on the passport. Finally, when Ennis showed him a close-up photo he had taken of Phyllis before she was removed from the bedroom, Alex told everything.

After Alex was booked, Collins congratulated Ennis on his ingenuity. "I never would have thought to analyze that stain on the carpet or to search Alex for evidence," he declared. "You must be psychic."

"Not psychic—thorough," Ennis explained. "Criminals have patterns, as you've often heard me say. The stocking strangler's first two victims were lovely young girls in their teens. I took one look in that bedroom and knew that Mrs. Ward didn't fit."

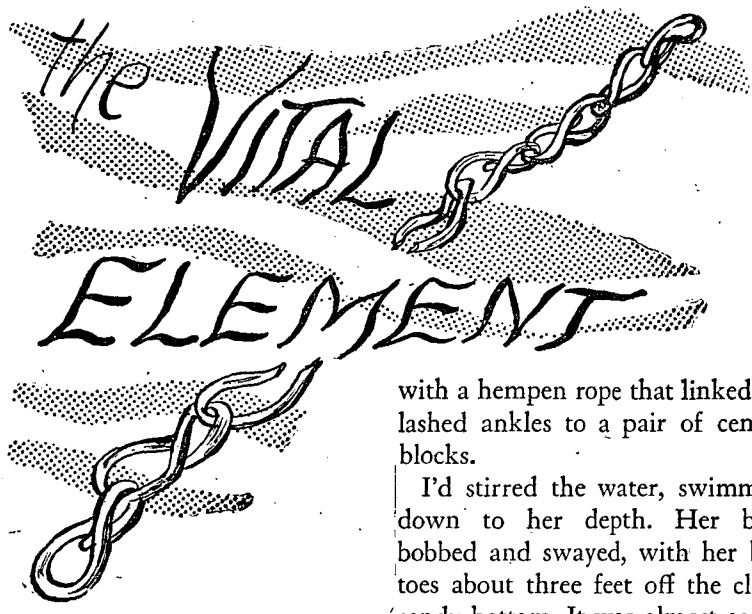
Collins didn't pursue the subject, which was just as well.

Ennis returned to his lab and placed the almost-strangulation stocking in a plastic bag. It wasn't an authentic murder weapon, but it did belong to the Strangler Collection. Peevishly, because it was an abominable thing for one man to steal another's style, he examined the second stocking they had found on Farmer's body, then folded it gently and placed it in his coat pocket. Outsider that it was, he would still take it home and put it in the drawer with the stockings he had taken from the Dorrit and Parsons girls, having first deftly strangled them in a manner bespeaking a perfectionist who had no fear of leaving damaging evidence which he alone, in the course of duty, would later discover.



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To a chain, every link is important, but there may be one that is vital.



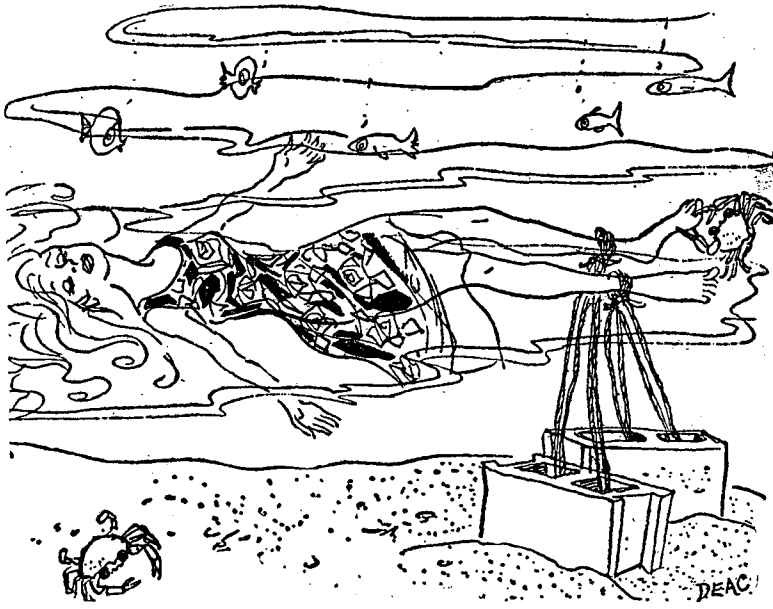
I WOULD never again love the warm water of the Gulf of Mexico . . . never find beauty in its blue-green color . . . never hear music in its rustling surf . . .

The dead girl had been hurriedly buried in the Gulf. She was anchored in about thirty feet of water with a hempen rope that linked her lashed ankles to a pair of cement blocks.

I'd stirred the water, swimming down to her depth. Her body bobbed and swayed, with her bare toes about three feet off the clean, sandy bottom. It was almost as if a strange, macabre, new life had come to her. Her long blonde hair swirled about her lovely gamine face with every tremor of the water. A living ballerina might have enjoyed her grace of motion, but not her state of being. I wept silently behind my face mask.

by Talmage Powell

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A single stroke sent me drifting, with my shoulder stirring silt from the bottom. I touched the rope where it passed into the holes in the cement blocks and out again. A natural process of wear and tear had set in. The sharp, ragged edges of the blocks were cutting the rope. In a matter of time, the rope would part. Her buoyancy would drift her toward the sunlight, to the surface, to discovery.

I eeled about, careful not to look at her again, and plunged up toward the shadow of the skiff. My flippers fired me into open air with a shower of spray and a small, quick explosion in my ears.

I rolled over the side of the skiff and lay a moment with my stomach churning with reaction. Sun, blue sky, the primitive shoreline of mangrove and palmetto, everything around me was weirdly unreal. It was as if all the clocks in the world had gone *tick*, then forgot to *tock*.

"You're a too-sensitive, chicken-hearted fink," I said aloud. I forced myself to peel out of my diving gear, picked up the oars, and put my back into the job of rowing in.

I docked and tied the skiff, then walked to the cottage with my gear slung across my shoulder. Sheltered by scraggly pines, the lonely

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cottage creaked tiredly in the heat.

I stood on the sagging front porch. For a moment I didn't have the strength or nerve to go inside. The cottage was its usual mess, a hodgepodge of broken down furniture, dirty dishes, empty beer bottles and bean cans, none of which bothered me. But *she* was strewn all over the place, the dead girl out there in the water. She was portrayed in oil, sketched in charcoal, delicately impressed in pink and tan watercolors. She was half finished on the easel in the center of the room, like a naked skull.

Shivering and dry-throated, I slipped dingy ducks over my damp swim trunks, wriggled into a tattered T-shirt, and slid my feet into strap sandals. The greasy feeling was working again in the pit of my stomach as I half-ran from the cottage.

Palmetto City lay like a humid landscape done with dirty brushes as my eight-year-old station wagon nosed into DeSota Street. Off the beaten tourist paths, the town was an unpainted clapboard mecca for lantern-jawed farmers, fishermen, swamp muckers.

I angled the steaming wagon beside a dusty pickup at the curb and got out. On the sidewalk, I glimpsed myself in the murky window of the hardware store: six feet of bone and cartilage without enough meat; thatch of unkempt sandy hair; a lean face that wished for character; huge sockets holding eyes that looked as if they hadn't slept for a week.

Inside the store, Braley Sawyer came toward me, a flabby, sloppy man in his rumpled tropical weight suit. "Well, if it ain't Tazewell Eversham, Palmetto City's own Gauguin!" He flashed a wet, gold-toothed smile. "Hear you stopped in Willy Morrow's filling station yestiddy and gassed up for a trip to Sarasota. Going up to see them fancy art dealers, I guess."

I nodded. "Got back early this morning."

"You going to remember us country hoogers when you're famous, Gauguin?" The thought brought fat laughter from him. I let his little joke pass and in due time he waddled behind the counter and asked, "You here to buy something?"

"Chain." The word formed in my parched throat but didn't make itself heard. I cleared my throat, tried again, "I want to buy about a dozen feet of medium weight chain."

He blinked. "Chain?"

"Sure," I said. I had better control of my voice now. "I'd like to put in a garden, but I have stump problems. Thought I'd dig and cut around the roots and snake the

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stumps out with the station wagon."

He shrugged, his eyes hanging onto me as he moved toward the rear of the store. "I guess it would work—if that bucket of bolts holds together."

I turned and stared at a vacant point in space as the chain rattled from its reel. "Easier to carry if I put it in a gunny sack, Gauguin," Sawyer yelled at me.

"That's fine." I heard the chain clank into the sack.

Seconds later Sawyer dropped the chain at my feet. I paid him, carried the gunny sack out, and loaded it in the station wagon. Then I walked down the street to the general store and bought a few things—canned goods, coffee, flour, and two quarts of the cheapest booze available, which turned out to be a low-grade rum.

I'd stowed the stuff beside the gunny sack, closed the tailgate, and was walking around the wagon to get in when a man called to me from across the street. "Hey, Taze."

The man who barged toward me looked like the crudest breed of piney woods sheriff, which is what Jack Tully was. Big-bellied, slope-shouldered, fleshy faced with whisky veins on cheeks and nose, his protruding eyes searched with a sadistic hunger. His presence reminded me that not all Neanderthals had died out ten thousand years ago.

He thumbed back his hat, spat, guffawed. "Kinda left you high and dry, didn't she, bub?"

An arctic wind blew across my neck. "What are you talking about, Sheriff?"

He elbowed me in the ribs; I recoiled, from his touch, not the force behind it. "Bub, I ain't so dumb. I know Melody Grant's been sneaking out to your shack."

"Any law against it?"

"Not as long as the neighbors don't complain." He gave an obscene wink. "And you got no neighbors, have you, bub?"

His filthy thoughts were written in his smirking, ignorant face. No explanation could change his mind, not in a million years. Might as well try to explain a painting to him.

"Maybe she ain't told you yet, bub?"

"Told me what?"

"About young Perry Tomlin, son of the richest man in the county. She's been seeing him, too, now that he's home with his university degree. Going to marry him, I hear, honeymoon in Europe. Big come-up for a shanty cracker girl, even one as pretty as Melody. I reckon that shack'll be mighty lonesome, knowing you'll never see her again."

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"Maybe it will, Sheriff, maybe it will."

"But . . ." We were suddenly conspirators. He gloated. ". . . there's one thing you can waller around in your mind."

"What's that, Sheriff?"

"Son of the county's richest man is just getting the leavings of a ragtag artist who's got hardly a bean in the pot." Laughter began to well inside of him. "Bub, I got to hand you that! Man, it would bust their blood vessels, Perry's and the old man's both, if they knew the truth."

Raucous laughter rolled out of him, to the point of strangulation.



When I got in the station wagon and drove off he was standing there wiping his eyes and quaking with mirth over the huge joke.

Back at the cottage, I opened a bottle of the rum, picked up a brush, and stood before the easel. I swigged from the bottle in my left hand and made brush strokes on the unfinished canvas with my right. By the time her face was emerging from the skull-like pattern, the rum had begun its work. I knew I wasn't cut to fit a situation like this one, but the rum made up a part of the deficit.

I dropped the brush and suddenly turned from the canvas. "Why did you have to leave me? Why?"

She was, of course, still out there when the gunny sack dragged me down through thirty feet of water. Her thin cotton dress clung to her as she wavered closer. Behind and beyond her a watery forest of seaweed dipped and swayed, a green and slimy floral offering.

I felt as if my air tanks were forcing raw acid into my lungs as I spilled the chain from the gunny sack. My trembling hands made one . . . two . . . three efforts . . . and the chain was looped about her cold, slender ankles.

I passed the chain through the holes in the cement blocks, and it no longer mattered whether the hempen rope held. The job was

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done. No risk of floating away.

In the cottage, I picked up the rum jug and let it kick me. Then I put on a clean shirt and pants and combed my hair nice and neat.

I went to the porch and took a final look at the bloodstains on the rough planking. My eyes followed the dripping trail those blood droplets had made down to the rickety pier and the flatbottom skiff. Before my stomach started acting up again, I dropped from the porch, ran across the sandy yard, and fell into the station wagon.

I pulled myself upright behind the wheel, started the crate. Through the non-reality of the day, the wagon coughed its way over the rutted, crushed seashell road to the highway. Trucks swooshed past and passenger cars swirled about me.

On the outskirts of Palmetto City, I turned the wagon onto the private road that snaked its way across landscaped acreage. The road wound up a slight rise to a colonial mansion that overlooked half the county, the low skyline of the town, the glitter of the Gulf in the far distance. A pair of horse-sized Great Danes were chasing, tumbling, rolling like a couple of puppies on the vast manicured lawn.

A lean, trim old man had heard the car's approach and stood watching from the veranda as I got out. I walked up the short, wide steps, the shadow of the house falling over me. The man watched me narrowly. He had a crop of silver hair and his hawkish face was wrinkled. These were the only clues to his age. His gray eyes were bright, quick, hard, as cold as a snake's. His mouth was an arrogant slit. Clothed in lime slacks and riotously colored sport shirt thirty years too young for him, his poised body exuded an aura of merciless, wiry power. In my distraught and wracked imagination he was as pleasant as a fierce, deadly lizard.

"Mr. Tomlin?"

He nodded. "And you're the tramp artist who's become a local character. Didn't you see those no trespassing signs when you turned off the highway?"

"I've got some business with your son, Mr. Tomlin."

"Perry's in Washington, tending to a matter for me. He flew up yesterday and won't be back for another couple days. You call, and make a proper appointment. And get that crate out of here—unless you want me to interrupt the dogs in their play."

My stomach felt as if it were caving in, but I gave him a steady look and said in an icy voice, "If Perry's away, you must be the man

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I want to talk to. Sure. Perry wouldn't have killed her, but you didn't share your son's feeling for her, did you?"

"I don't believe I know what you're talking about." He knew, all right. The first glint of caution and animal cunning showed in his eyes.

"Then I'll explain, Mr. Tomlin. Yesterday I went to Sarasota to try to interest an art dealer in a one-man show. When I got back this morning I found some bloodstains. They led me to the water. I spent the morning diving, searching. I found her in about thirty feet of water."

I expected him to say something, but he didn't. He just stood there looking at me with those small, agate eyes.

"It wasn't hard to figure out," I said. "She'd come to the cottage to tell me it was all over between us. The shanty cracker girl was marrying the richest son in the county. But you didn't cotton to that idea, did you?"

"Go on," he said quietly.

"There's little more. It's all very simple. You sent Perry out of town to give you a chance to break it up between him and the cracker girl. Not much escapes your notice. You'd heard the gossip about her and the tramp artist. When you couldn't find her in town, you decided to try my place. I guess you tried to talk her off, buy her off, threaten her off. When none of it worked, you struck her in a rage. You killed her."

The old man stared blindly at the happy Great Danes.

"Realizing what you'd done," I said, "you scrounged a rope, couple of cement blocks, and planted her in thirty feet of water." I shook my head. "Not good. Not good at all. When the blocks sawed the rope in two, a nosy cop might find evidence you'd been around the place; a tire track, footprint, or maybe some fingerprints you'd left sticking around."

He studied the frolicking dogs as if planning their butchery. "You haven't named the vital element, artist; proof of guilt, proof that I did anything more than talk to her."

"Maybe so," I nodded, "but could a man in your position afford the questions, the scandal, the doubts that would arise and remain in your son's mind until the day you die? I think not. So I helped you."

His eyes flashed to me.

"I substituted a chain for the rope," I said. "The cement blocks will not cut that in two." I drew a breath. "And of course I want something in return. A thousand dollars. I'm sure you've that much

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handy, in a wall safe if not on your person. It's bargain day, Mr. Tomlin."

He thought it over for several long minutes. The sinking sun put a golden glitter in his eyes.

"And how about the future, artist? What if you decided you needed another thousand dollars one of these days?"

I shook my head. "I'm not that stupid. Right now I've caught you flat-footed. It's my moment. Everything is going for me. You haven't time to make a choice, think, plan. But it would be different in the future. Would I be stupid enough to try to continue blackmailing the most powerful man in the county after he's had a chance to get his forces and resources together?"

"Your question contains a most healthy logic, artist."

"One thousand bucks," I said, "and I hightail it down the driveway in the wagon. Otherwise, I'll throw the fat in the fire, all of it, including the chain about her ankles and my reason for putting it there. And we'll see which one of us has most to lose."

Without taking his eyes off my face, he reached for his wallet. He counted out a thousand dollars without turning a hair; chicken feed, pocket change to him.

I folded the sheaf of fifties and hundreds, some of them new bills, and slipped it into my pocket with care. We parted then, the old man and I, without another word being spoken.

The station wagon seemed to run with new life when I reached the highway. I felt the pressure of the money—the vital element—against my thigh.

The chain on her ankles had lured Tomlin, convinced him that he was dealing with a tramp interested only in a thousand bucks, so he had signed his confession of guilt by putting his fingerprints all over the money.

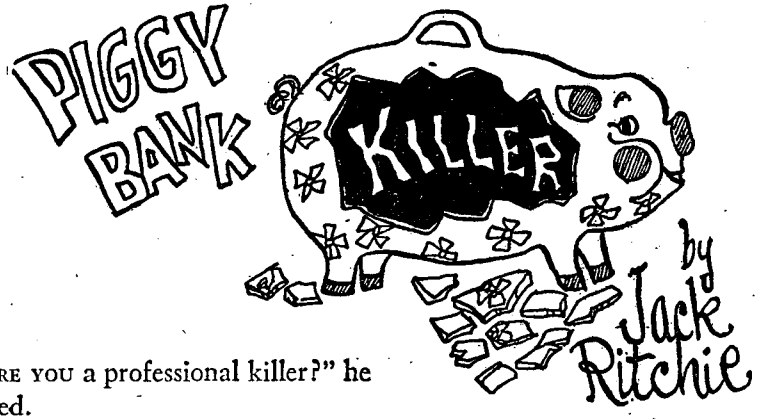
I didn't trust the gross sheriff in Palmetto City. I thought it far better to take the vital element and every detail of the nightmare directly to the state's attorney in St. Petersburg.

I was pretty sure the battered old station wagon would get me there.



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A threat to an established pattern is often the springboard of initiative.



"ARE YOU a professional killer?" he asked.

"Of course," I said.

He was a boy of about twelve and he wore glasses and a clean, but obviously aging jacket. "Good," he said. "I'd like you to murder my great uncle on my father's side, James Rawlins. I can pay you $27.50." He looked past me at my cluttered study-livingroom. "Actually I have $27.56, but I thought you'd prefer to deal in round numbers."

"I suppose you were saving for a bicycle?"

"No. Webster's International Dictionary. Third edition. Despite what people say about it."

I let him in and cleared a chair of some books. "Why do you want your Uncle Rawlins killed?"

"He's interfering with my mother's education."

I began filling one of my straight pipes. "Perhaps you could elaborate just a little bit?"

"The situation is simple," he said. "My mother is a widow. My father died when I was three. His parents—my grandparents—were killed in an automobile accident when he was ten and Uncle James took over his rearing. Uncle James is quite rich. However, since he

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did not approve of his nephew's marriage, we were left penniless when father died. Uncle James—who has never bothered to see me, by the way—has grudgingly been keeping us going these past nine years with a small amount of money each month, but now he threatens to discontinue that entirely unless mother quits college."

I had the feeling the boy could have written *War and Peace* on the back of a postcard. "Your Uncle James disapproves of higher education for women?"

"I don't think that's it," he said.

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"I believe it's because through all these years he has derived a certain sadistic enjoyment in our dependency upon him."

"And this will end if your mother is educated?"

"Naturally. My mother accepted his charity—rather than get a job—because she felt I should have her undivided attention during my crucial childhood years. However, I am now twelve and about to enter high school, and mother believes that now it is safe for her to finish her education. She was a junior when she left college to get married. It is her intention to become a teacher and thereby achieve our independence."

"Why doesn't she just declare her independence right now by getting a job?"

"That is what she is going to do if she can't go to college. But I don't think that's at all wise. What kind of a job could an untrained woman of thirty-two get? Especially in view of automation."

"What is your name?"

"Donald."

"Well, Donald," I said, "has it ever occurred to you that your uncle's monthly payment, small as it is, will cease entirely if I kill him?"

"Yes. But on the other hand I am his only blood relative and I rather think that I would eventually get some portion of his estate, whether I am mentioned in his will or not. I would imagine his beneficiaries would prefer a settlement to a court fight."

Apparently the boy had thought of everything. "Donald," I said, "let's go back to the beginning. What made you think that I would murder anyone at all for $27.50?"

"I didn't. That was just a gambit for your sympathy. I thought you might do it for nothing. *If* you did decide to kill Uncle James."

"I'm glad you emphasized the 'if'," I said, "because that brings me to my second point. Whatever gave you the idea that I'm a professional killer?"

He smiled. "You said so, didn't you?"

"My dear boy," I said, "when I hear a knock at my door and find a small boy who blithely asks me if I am a professional killer, what would you expect a man of my acerbic temperament to answer?"

He grinned. "Exactly what you did."

I flushed slightly. "Donald, when you attend college, in what field do you intend to specialize?"

"Psychology."

I was not the least surprised. "Since there are any number of people in this world, why did you knock on my door? And how did you know about my temperament?"

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"My mother happens to be in your Comparative Literature class."

I thought about that. Oh, yes. Madelaine Rawlins. Straight A student. I remembered her October thesis, *Why Women Don't Read Hemingway*.

"But surely she has other instructors and professors? Why did you come to me?"

"You're the one she talks about."

Naturally I was curious. "Favorably?"

"Yes and no," Donald said. "But anyway, I don't know any adult males and so I had to turn to someone."

I sighed. "Just what in the world do you expect me to do?"

"Well, I thought you might go to see Uncle James. Reason with him. But if that doesn't work, and it probably won't, you could tell him that I tried to hire you to kill him."

"Why not tell him yourself?"

"He wouldn't take me seriously, but coming from an adult, he might believe it. You could even pretend that you're considering taking the job."

"And you imagine that such a threat coming from an assistant professor would throw him into a fit of abject terror?"

"You don't have to mention about being a professor. You could sort of leave that up in the air. Let him think just whatever he likes."

"That I really am a professional killer?"

"Why not?"

I shook my head. "Donald, when you attend your psychology classes, please don't go to sleep. You have a lot to learn. I sympathize deeply with your mother's problem, but I haven't the slightest intention of threatening anyone."

I expected him to press his point, but he merely smiled and rose. "I guess I'll be going."

I let him get to the door before I spoke again, "Donald, if you really could hire somebody to murder your uncle, would you?"

His face hardened. "Yes, I would."

The next morning while lecturing to my Comparative Literature class, I sought out and noted the regular features and rather attractive brunette coiffure of Donald's mother. Near the end of the period I interrupted my discourse to say, "Mrs. Rawlins, would you please remain a few moments after the bell?"

When we were alone, she looked at me expectantly. "Yes, Professor Weatherby?"

"Mrs. Rawlins," I said, "did your son tell you that he came to see me last night?"

She lifted her eyebrows. "Why, no."

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"He offered me $27.50 to murder his Uncle James."

She smiled slightly. "Did you accept?"

I cleared my throat. "He informed me of your particular predicament. Do you intend to quit the university?"

"I imagine I'll have to. Though I do wish I could have at least finished this semester."

"Your husband's uncle seems to have very little contact with you. How did he manage to discover that you were attending college?"

"I write to him about once every six months—more or less as a duty, though he never replies—and I mentioned it. I thought he would be pleased at the prospect of soon having us off his hands. Apparently he wasn't. I received word from his lawyer to that effect."

"Your son mentioned that you were considering taking a job rather than continue to accept the allowance?"

"Yes. If I can find one."

"Donald seemed to think that I could do something about it. Besides killing his Uncle James, I mean."

The gray eyes studied me. "Can you?"

I was slightly uncomfortable. "I don't see what influence I could possibly have."

"Did Donald have any suggestions for a course of action?"

"Well . . . yes. He thought that I ought to see his uncle and try to reason with him. And if that didn't work, then. . . ."

She smiled again. "Yes?"

My collar was definitely tight. "But the whole thing is ridiculous. I am a perfect stranger to you, to Donald, and to his uncle."

"Of course," she said. "So there's no need for you to get involved." She glanced at her watch. "Do you mind if I go now? I wouldn't want to be late for my next class."

When she was gone, I sat down in one of the student chairs and engaged in the process of thinking. I eventually sighed my way into a decision.

I arrived at Rawlins Tool & Die at approximately two-thirty.

James Rawlins' secretary was narrow-eyed and appeared to have a headache. "Which company do you represent?"

"None," I said. "My business with Mr. Rawlins is personal."

"Mr. Rawlins is an extremely busy man. Perhaps you could give me some idea what this personal business is?"

"No," I said. "I couldn't."

She regarded me coldly. "Take a chair. I'll let you know when—and if—Mr. Rawlins will see you."

Perhaps it was her idea, but I was kept waiting forty-five min-

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utes before she condescended to show me into his office.

James Rawlins was large and gray-haired, but tanned and obviously fit. He probably took great pride in defeating tennis opponents thirty years his junior.

He glanced at his memo pad impatiently. "Mr. Weatherby?"

"Yes." I decided to get directly to the point. "Mr. Rawlins, I have been offered $27.50 to kill you."

He looked up. "That's the most original touch I've heard yet. Am I supposed to offer you thirty dollars not to?"

"No."

"And who made you this munificent offer?"

"Your grandnephew."

His eyes hardened. "Just who *are* you?"

"Weatherby," I said. "But you have that information already. Anything else is extraneous." My attention was momentarily distracted by a bookcase containing a number of trophies celebrating his prowess at tennis, golf, and sailing. "Mr. Rawlins," I said, "for the past nine years you have been sparingly supporting your grandnephew and his mother, but now at the prospect that your overwhelming generosity will no longer be needed, you seem to object."

"That's my business."

"In any event," I said, "it appears that Madelaine Rawlins would prefer getting a job to continuing to receive money under your terms."

He flushed angrily. "What kind of a job can she get? Waiting on tables? All right, let her."

"It seems to me that you are, in essence, still punishing your nephew for choosing to disobey your wishes regarding his marriage partner."

His color was still high. "Why the devil did my grandnephew choose to go to you with his miserable $27.50?"

"He thought I might be able to help him."

He studied me and wariness slowly crept into his eyes. "And just how did he think you could help him?"

I reached toward my inside coat pocket for my tobacco pouch. The movement seemed to trigger galvanic electricity in his veins. He flinched and waited tensely.

I hesitated, evaluating the situation, and smiled with a certain significance. I removed the hand from my coat empty—for now, the motion seemed to indicate.

Rawlins tried a weak smile. "Of course you wouldn't kill anybody for $27.50?"

"Naturally not," I said. "However money isn't everything." Really now, Weatherby, I told myself,

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why ever do you say such things?

He licked his lips. "And naturally you wouldn't kill anybody in his office when he is surrounded by literally hundreds of employees?"

I'm afraid I showed teeth. "I understand that the safest place to murder anyone these days is in Grand Central Station during a rush hour. No one has the initiative to interfere, and the thousand witnesses will tell a thousand different stories."

Rawlins now was perspiring.

I pulled myself together. Somehow I had taken a wrong turning and now—in the interests of continuity, at least—very little remained except for me to kill him.

Retreat was obviously in order.

My eyes searched the room for inspiration. They fastened upon a framed photograph of a football team, vintage 1920's. Rawlins was undoubtedly in one of the rows.

"Mr. Rawlins," I said, "you have never seen your grandnephew?"

"No. Never laid eyes on him."

"Or talked to him?"

"No."

I glanced at my watch. Yes, it was just about the right time. "Mr. Rawlins," I said, "I want you to come with me."

He was not at all happy.

"You will be perfectly safe," I said. "You have my word."

My word obviously meant nothing to him but, on the other hand, he decided that he had no choice. He sighed and rose.

Outside the office, he stopped at his secretary's desk and cleared his throat. "Dora, if I'm not back in one hour I want you to call my cousin Horatio and tell him I can't make it today."

Oh, my, I thought, *since Donald told me that he was James Rawlins' only blood relative, then obviously this cousin Horatio bit is a plea for help.*

His words, and possibly the tone of his voice, had alerted Dora. She stared at me, and I had the uneasy feeling that she might be memorizing my features for a police lineup.

I smiled. "What your employer means specifically and absolutely, is that you are to call no one—no one at all—for at least one hour. Otherwise our business deal might terminate unsatisfactorily." I turned to Rawlins for confirmation.

"Yes," he said hastily. "Don't call anybody or talk to anybody for one hour." He took a stab at optimism. "I should be back by then, shouldn't I?"

"Of course," I said.

Five minutes later, we drove away in my car. I selected the Stevenson High School at random and parked at the football practice field. The first and second teams

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were engaged in daily scrimmage.

"What now?" Rawlins asked.

"Just watch," I said.

After about ten minutes, one of the backs succeeded in breaking through tackle and scampered thirty-five yards for a touchdown. He was a tall, good-looking boy, and he grinned as he tossed the ball back upfield.

"That's your grandnephew," I said.

Rawlins stared at the boy for a full minute. A tight smile appeared on his face. "So he's big and strong and knows how to play football. What am I supposed to do now? Run to my lawyer and change my will?"

"That might help," I said. "But for the present, I simply suggest that you continue sending your regular allowance to Donald's mother and withdraw your objections concerning her college attendance.

His eyes went back to the boy.

"There is one other thing," I said. "I don't want you ever to talk to him or see him again. I think he'll be much happier that way."

"That's an order?"

"Yes." I turned on the ignition and pulled away from the curb. "By the way, I wouldn't bother going to the police about any of this. In the first place, it would be just your word against mine. And in the second, I don't think you would enjoy the publicity of having a grandnephew who offers $27.50 for your death."

"And if I don't follow your suggestions in all respects, you would . . . take care of me?"

I smiled—rather like a cold-eyed killer, I thought—and said nothing.

Frankly, I was enjoying myself, both for performance and accomplishment.

At Sixth and Wells, I stopped for a red light, directly opposite the central police station. Evidently a change of shift period had just occurred. Dozens of uniformed policemen were descending the wide cement stairs.

Rawlins quickly opened the door on his side and stepped out.

Naturally I was alarmed. "Have you forgotten what I said about going to the police?"

"No, I haven't forgotten and I have no intention of telling the police. However I like having them around me because it gives me the safety to inform you of two facts. First of all, that wasn't my grandnephew."

I frowned. "You said you'd never seen him before."

"I haven't. Not personally, that is. But every year his mother seems to make it her business to send me a snapshot of him, so I am perfect-

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ly aware of what he really looks like."

He smiled, but without humor. "And secondly, before I entered this car I memorized the license number. I intend to write a full account of what happened and deposit it, along with your license number, in a safe place. If anything should happen to me, the police will know immediately who is responsible." He slammed the door shut.

The traffic light had turned to green and there was nothing for me to do but go ahead. I do not know whether I was more embarrassed or more depressed, but whichever took precedence, I still came to the reluctant conclusion that it was my duty to inform the interested parties of my failure. I stopped at a drugstore telephone booth to look up Madelaine Rawlins' address.

When I arrived there, Donald opened the front door of the one-family dwelling at my knock. "Oh, hello, Professor." He showed me into the comfortable livingroom.

"Where is your mother?" I asked.

"She's out shopping. At the supermarket, I think."

I sat down. "Donald, I'm afraid I've made things even worse than they were."

When I finished telling him about my meeting with James Rawlins, Donald smiled.

I flushed slightly. "Well, I tried my best."

"That's all right," he said. "You got a lot further than I thought you would."

"Then you *expected* me to fail?"

He shrugged. "I just thought it might be pretty hard to reason with Uncle James."

I studied him with renewed interest. "Donald, something has just occurred to me. When you came to me with your story, what would be my most obvious first action?"

"I don't know."

"But I'm sure you do. The first thing I would do would be to see your mother and talk to her. Isn't that right? And possibly be impressed?"

"I guess so."

I smiled. "Donald, I have the strange feeling that when you came to me, you had in mind a solution to your problem which you did not mention."

"Did I?"

"Yes," I said. "How does it happen that your mother never remarried?"

"I don't know. I guess it's because intelligent men are few and far between."

His eyes went to the clock. "I *think* she went shopping." He rose abruptly and went to the French

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secretary against one wall. He opened the top drawer and seemed relieved. "Yes, it's still there."

"What is?" I asked automatically.

"The gun," Donald said.

I got out of my chair and walked over. The butt of what appeared to be an automatic protruded from the drawer of tightly packed books. "Is it loaded?"

"It shouldn't be," Donald said. "I emptied the clip."

I reached into the drawer. The weapon seemed to be stuck and I pulled. The automatic fired.

I closed my eyes for a moment. "Evidently it was loaded." I removed the clip and examined it. "It's full now and apparently someone put an extra bullet in the chamber."

Donald removed a few of the books. "No harm done. It just went through a few of these and stuck in the last one."

"Donald," I said, "you were worried that your mother had taken the gun? Why?"

He put the books under his arm. "I'll get rid of these. There's no need mother has to know about this." He smiled faintly. "She might think you weren't very intelligent."

He evidently went down into the basement because I heard the sound of a furnace door being opened.

Through the front window I saw Madelaine carrying two bags of groceries up the path to the house.

Had all this talk about killing James Rawlins given her the idea of personally solving her problem by. . . . I glanced at the automatic in my hand. Out of sight, out of mind. I shoved the gun under the davenport.

I would have to talk to Madelaine alone. If that wasn't possible now, I would speak to her at the university tomorrow.

Madelaine opened the front door. "Why, hello, Professor. It's nice to see you."

Donald returned from the basement and I re-told my encounter with James Rawlins.

Madelaine shook her head. "You really shouldn't have taken all that trouble. I'm sure things will work out." She moved toward the kitchen. "Would you care to stay for supper?"

"Well . . ." I said, and was easily persuaded.

In all, it was rather a pleasant evening and reclaimed the day. I did not leave until after nine.

The next morning, after my first class, I found two men waiting. They showed me their badges and identified themselves.

"We'd like you to come with us to headquarters," Sergeant Waller

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said. "Last night at approximately eleven-thirty, James Rawlins was shot to death."

I experienced sudden overwhelming dismay. Why hadn't I made it a distinct point to speak to Madelaine last night? Perhaps I could have prevented her from . . .

Waller continued. "This morning when his lawyer heard about the event, he came to us with a sealed envelope which Rawlins had given him earlier in the evening. We read all about the $27.50 and so we came here."

"You traced my license number, I suppose?"

"We didn't have to take the time. Donald Rawlins told us where to find you."

"The letter can be explained," I said. "I am not a professional killer. Not even an amateur, for that matter."

"Maybe not," Waller said noncommittally, "but we'll talk about that at headquarters."

I cleared my throat. "I can understand why I am a suspect, of course. Do you have any others?"

He thought about it for a few seconds before he decided to answer. "Naturally we're talking to the boy."

"Utterly ridiculous," I said. "He wouldn't harm a fly." I tried to make the next question casual. "Any suspects besides the two of us, like a genuine public enemy?"

"Not yet."

Good, I thought. *Perhaps Madelaine was safe after all.* I almost felt cheerful.

In their unmarked police car, I said, "Well, gentlemen, I've never been taken in for murder before. What is the procedure?"

"We'll ask you some questions," Sergeant Waller said, "and if we don't like your answers, we'll take your fingerprints and give you a paraffin test."

"Paraffin test? Oh, yes. For powder grains?" Then I remembered and laughed slightly. "As a matter of fact, I think you might find powder grains on my right hand."

Waller looked at me.

"It was an accident," I said. "I happened to be handling an automatic in Mrs. Rawlins' house when it discharged. If we could stop there for just a moment, her son could explain everything."

"We won't have to stop there," Waller said. "He's at headquarters."

At headquarters, Waller took me to a room where Madelaine and Donald were waiting.

"Donald," I said, "will you please tell the sergeant here how I happen to have powder grains on my hand?"

Donald's face was blank. "Powder grains? What powder grains?"

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"The ones I got when that automatic accidentally discharged in your livingroom yesterday."

He shook his head slowly. "I don't remember anything like that happening."

I blinked. Why did the boy lie?

"Donald," Sergeant Waller said, "you *did* offer Professor Weatherby $27.50 to kill your uncle, didn't you?"

"Well, yes. But it was sort of a joke and I admitted it to him."

"But why did you make the offer in the first place?"

Donald looked at the floor. "Well, my mother's in one of his classes and from the way she talked about him I knew that she was very impressed."

Madelaine colored faintly. "Donald!"

He continued. "So I just thought that if the two of them got somehow introduced . . . I mean talking to each other . . . well, maybe nature would take its course and our problems would be solved." He sighed. "I guess things just worked too fast and too strong, and he thought he was doing us a favor by killing Uncle James."

The door opened and a plainclothesman appeared. "The boys just found a gun on the grounds of the James Rawlins place. It looks like the murder weapon and it's got some fingerprints on it."

I was about to caution Madelaine not to say a word until she had seen a lawyer, but then I looked at Donald. I closed my eyes. The computer section of my brain neatly sorted facts and came up with a conclusion: I had stepped into a little boy's fiendish pit and the walls were dead vertical.

Waller tapped my shoulder. "Professor Weatherby, would you come with me please?"

I attempted a riposte with the straw of reason. "Sergeant, if I murdered someone, I most surely would not conveniently leave the weapon with my fingerprints in the neighborhood."

The plainclothesman had the answer. "There are a couple of acres of woods and underbrush around the Rawlins house. The way I figure it is that after the killer shot Rawlins he ran out of the house into that tangle and stumbled. The gun flew out of his hand and because it was dark and no moon, he couldn't find it again. Besides, he didn't have the time to do much looking. The servants heard the shot and were calling the police, so he decided to get himself out, hoping that maybe we wouldn't find the gun, or maybe he could get a chance to come back later and look for it."

I was taken to the fingerprint

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department and after that to another room where I waited with Sergeant Waller.

Yes, it was quite ingenious and I was . . . I blushed . . . the patsy. Donald had anticipated everything. He had come to me with his fantastic offer and, naturally, my next logical move had been to see his mother. Just as logically—since she *was* an attractive intelligent woman—I had been impressed and reacted by endeavoring to help her. That had taken the form of my visit to James Rawlins.

At that point, Donald could not have been absolutely certain of what I would say or do, but evidently he had had high hopes and I had not disappointed him.

There had remained only the process of getting my fingerprints on the automatic and powder grains on my hand. He had booby-trapped the gun in the drawer in such a manner that when I pulled, it would fire. So, last night Donald had taken care not to unduly disturb my fingerprints when he used the gun to kill James Rawlins. When that had been accomplished, he had left the automatic on the grounds for the police to find.

Another thought tugged at me. Had it been *entirely* Donald's idea? That bothered me almost more than my present predicament. I had almost surrendered to utter resignation when the door opened and a laboratory technician appeared.

"Those aren't the professor's fingerprints on the gun," he announced cheerfully.

To say that I was surprised was to whisper.

Waller frowned. "But it was the murder weapon, wasn't it?"

"Sure. That much checks out. But not the professor's fingerprints. As a matter of fact you could almost tell from the size alone. I'd say they were the prints of a woman or a boy."

Sergeant Waller gave the necessary order. "Fingerprint the woman and the boy."

When that was done, Waller and I went to see them.

Who *had* killed James Rawlins? I wondered. Donald? Or Madelaine?

"Donald," I said, "my fingerprints were not on the gun."

He sighed. "Not even one?"

"Not even one."

He looked at Waller. "Did you check the clip?"

Waller nodded. "When we look for fingerprints we don't miss anything."

He looked at the floor again. "I was hoping that . . . whoever . . . used the gun would have sense enough to wear gloves. That way

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some of the professor's fingerprints would still be on the gun. The clip especially."

Waller's eyes were narrow. "Are you trying to tell us that you were trying to frame Professor Weatherby?"

Donald rubbed his neck. "I was going to wait a week or so—until his motive for killing Uncle James was stronger, so to speak—and then commit the crime. I would have left the gun with the professor's fingerprints behind."

Waller leaned forward. "But you decided to kill him last night? Why?"

"Donald," I said, "don't say another word. Not another word."

But the damage had already been done, and Sergeant Waller had evidently re-examined some of Donald's previous words.

"Just a minute," he said. "You said that you hoped that 'whoever' used the gun would have had enough sense to wear gloves. Does that mean that *you* didn't shoot your uncle?" His eyes went irrevocably to Madelaine.

"Donald," I said again, "not another word until we've seen a lawyer."

But Madelaine shook her head. "No, Donald. I want you to tell the sergeant everything. Do you understand?"

He seemed to agree. "I guess I might as well since they've got all our fingerprints anyway." He sighed. "It's one thing planning a murder—even fun—but it's another thing actually committing it. Last night I thought things over for a long time and decided that I really couldn't go through with it after all."

Waller nodded. "Go on."

"When you came to our house and told us that Uncle James had been murdered, I knew that *I* hadn't killed him, and I was almost positive that Professor Weatherby hadn't, so when I looked in the drawer where the gun was supposed to be and found that it was gone, well . . ."

Madelaine smiled faintly. "You thought that *I* had killed Uncle James? And you tried to protect me by implicating Professor Weatherby?"

Donald's eyes went to me. "I'm really sorry. I've kind of gotten to like you, but still I would have preferred that you go to jail rather than . . ." he swallowed, ". . . somebody else."

The laboratory technician appeared. "Their fingerprints aren't the ones on the gun either."

Madelaine was the only one of us not surprised. She smiled. "Of course I didn't kill Uncle James. I don't think murder is the solution to anything. Especially if you do it

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yourself. We're all agreed on that."

Donald was immensely relieved, but still puzzled. "But why should someone carefully wipe the professor's fingerprints off the gun, and how did the killer get hold of our automatic in the first place?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," I said. "The last time I touched the .45 was when I shoved it under the davenport in your livingroom."

Sergeant Waller frowned. "A .45? The murder weapon was .25 caliber. A Beretta."

"In that case, Donald," I said, "your automatic is probably still under the davenport and has been all this time."

Sergeant Waller surveyed us with a trace of irritation. "Well, if none of you did it, then who the devil did?"

I thought about that too. "Sergeant, it seems to me a remarkable coincidence that the killer should choose the precise time when my license number was put into an incriminating letter. Clearly someone hoped I would be blamed. Did his lawyer know what was in the letter?"

"No. Rawlins just gave it to him with instructions to give it to the police if he died violently."

I pondered that. "If he didn't tell his lawyer, the chances are pretty good that he told no one else, still . . ." I saw a light. "Was the letter possibly typewritten, Sergeant?"

"Yes."

"Neatly and without errors?"

"Yes."

I nodded. "Rawlins was a businessman, but I doubt if businessmen are good typists. He undoubtedly dictated the letter. I suggest you get the fingerprints of his secretary. I believe her name is Dora." I smiled with justifiable satisfaction. "I hope *that* will teach her to keep me waiting forty-five minutes."

We read about it in the newspaper the next day.

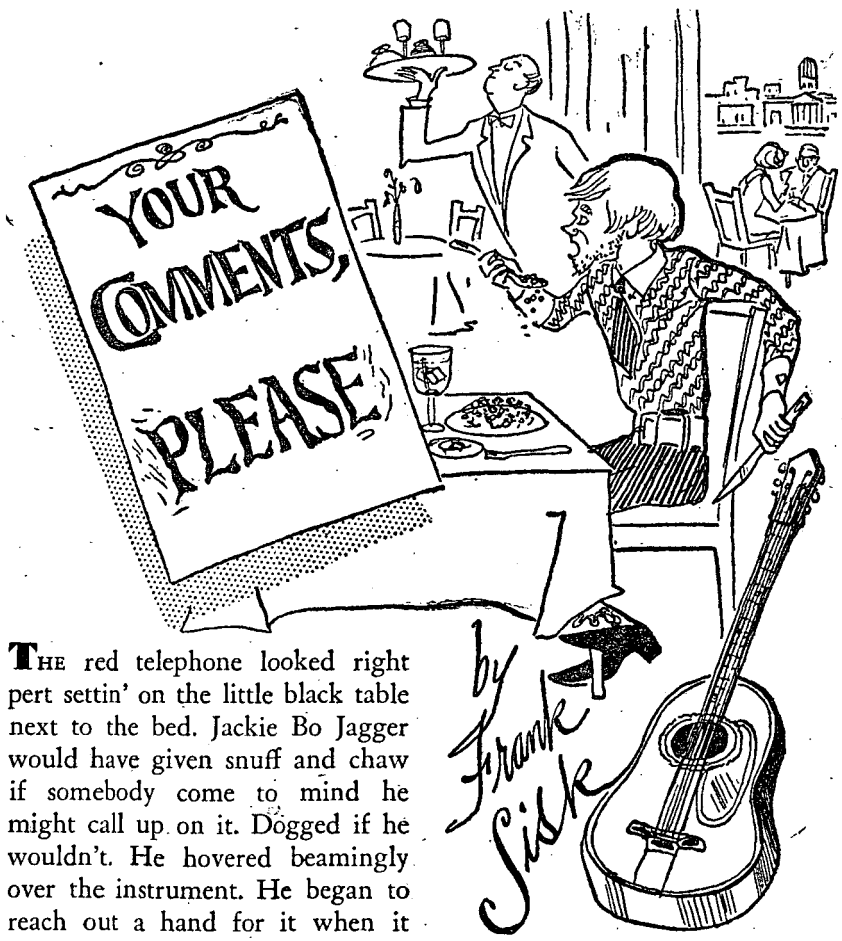
Dora had been led to believe for quite some time that she would become Mrs. James Rawlins. When she had finally realized that matrimony was definitely not on his agenda, she had plotted murder and suicide. However, after my encounter with Rawlins, she had decided that perhaps suicide was not really necessary after all. It would be preferable to have a professional murderer take the blame for his death—and professional murderer she thought I was.

As for Madelaine, at the end of the semester she received an A in my Comparative Literature course. There have been some sly hints from faculty members that I exhibited favoritism, but there is no truth to that whatsoever.

My wife earned her grade.

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Apparently, an "original" is not always "priceless."



by Frank Sisk

THE red telephone looked right pert settin' on the little black table next to the bed. Jackie Bo Jagger would have given snuff and chaw if somebody come to mind he might call up on it. Dogged if he wouldn't. He hovered beamingly over the instrument. He began to reach out a hand for it when it suddenly rang. Jackie Bo like to

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leap about two feet up in the air.

Finally he managed to address the mouthpiece. "Howdy," he said warily.

"Howdy yourself, Bo." It was Uncle Sam Sims at the other end. "I see you're keepin' close to quarters like I done tole you."

"That's a plumb fact, Uncle Sam," Jackie Bo said. "I go down for vittles is about all."

"They feedin' you proper, son?"

"Right proper indeedy, sir. Except the blackeye peas want a mite of middlin' meat, my way of thinkin'."

"I reckon," Uncle Sam Sims said.

"And the coffee wants a smidge of chicory for my own self's taste."

"I reckon. Well, Bo, vittles aside, I got us a radio audition tomorrow at midmornin'. Ten by the clock. Now how's that for managin'?"

"You sure don't allow no weeds to take rut," Jackie Bo said. "I heard that about you times agone. They say when Uncle Sam Sims takes aholt, folks set right up on their hind legs."

"I'm all business," Uncle Sam Sims said. "S'truth. Well, anyhow, I'll come round to fetch you tomorrow at nine sharp. Or nine-thirty. Mind, you be in the hotel lobby and ready."

"Don't you all fret, Uncle Sam."

"And go over them songs I taken a fancy to. 'Specially *God Bless Our Turnip Greens*. I truly cotton to that there."

"And *Father Take The Cow Away*—that 'peared to set you tappin'."

"It sure did that, Bo. So you just pick through them ditties a few more times and come tomorrow—well, we'll see. Now bye-bye."

With a happy grin on his pimpled face, Jackie Bo gently returned the telephone to its cradle. A talk with Uncle Sam Sims always made him feel treetop tall, and confabulatin' on a red telephone in a high-tone hotel room, like they do in the movies, was near fitten enough to spat off a rash of hot damns.

He sat down on the made-up bed, big enough to sleep three, and looked dreamily across the room. His guitar stood in a corner cushioned against a grape-colored drapery drawn back from the great wide window that overlooked the glistening dome of the state capitol. Attaining focus, his gaze dropped from the guitar to the thick carpeting. It was green as April grass and covered the whole floor.

"Hot damn!" Jackie Bo exclaimed. Bending down, he removed one of the tight-fitting, highly-polished black boots that Uncle Sam Sims had purchased the day before in the discount store.

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He then removed the woolly white sock that was so all-fired ticklish and was just testing the wiggle of his bare toes when a one-two knock sounded on the door.

"Come right in," Jackie Bo shouted.

He heard the knob turn but the door didn't open. Then he recollected that this here door appeared to lock itself most of the time, so he stood up and hobbled across the deep green, bootfooted and barefooted, to give the knocker a welcome.

It was what Uncle Sam Sims called a bellhop, a kind of scrawny old chap got up in jacket and pants of robin-egg blue with a stitch of gold piping at the edge of the lapels and cuffs and pockets. His gray hair was parted dead in the middle. The cast of his wrinkled old face was serious enough for a kinfolk buryin'.

"Howdy," Jackie Bo said with a friendly smile.

"Mister Jaggers?" the bellhop asked gravely.

"Jagger. Just one of me is all. Jackie Bo Jagger, sir."

"Mister Martineau would be obliged if you would immediately present yourself at the desk."

Jackie Bo squinted quizzically. "The desk? What desk you mean, man?"

"The desk in the lobby."

"Well, hell fire! And who all is this Mister Martineau—a radio man?"

"Mister Martineau is the Hotel Magnifico's chief of clerks," the bellhop said condescendingly. "I'll wait while you, ah, are correctly shod."

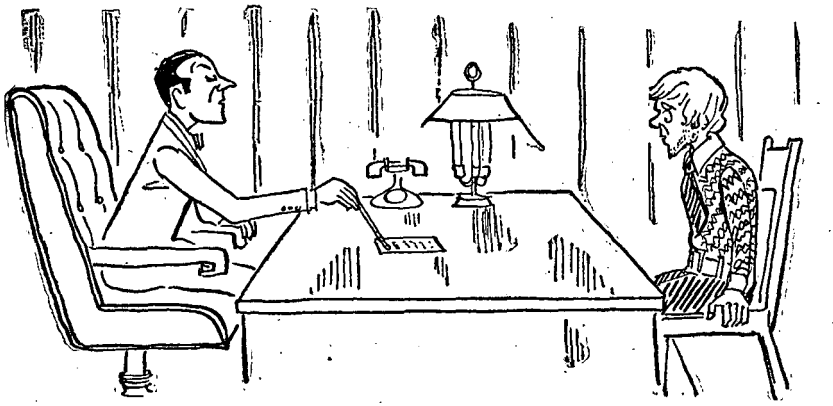
Jackie Bo saw nothing strange in receiving such a regal summons from Mr. Martineau, chief of clerks. Until yesterday the closest he had ever come to hotel life in all his twenty-one years was an overnight stay in a tourist cabin outside Huskboro that time Paw and he took eight hogs to market, and then he was no more than a shirttail chap of ten or twelve.

Mr. Martineau was tall, tan and hawkfaced, with a mustache about as wide as three hairs woven together. He met Jackie Bo at the long counter in the lobby and took him behind it to an inside room that contained a desk and two chairs. Directing Jackie Bo with an interesting flip of wrist and forefinger to take the chair in front of the desk, Mr. Martineau sat in the one behind it. Then he picked up a piece of paper the size of a postcard and gave it a mournful glance, saying, "Let us begin, Mister Jaggers, by ascertaining—"

"Jagger, sir, is all."

"My apologies. But am I right in assuming that this—" he pushed

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the rectangle of paper across the desk top with the rubber end of a pencil, "—is your handiwork, Mister Jagger?"

Jackie Bo gawked at the paper and recognized it instantly because of his own laborious signature somewhat blotched at the bottom, with *rfd 3 ris falls* barely squeezed in beneath it. "Why, yes, sir, I done wrote that. Writin' practise up in my room yesdee after supper. And I left it on them chest of drawers. How come it's down here?"

"It reached my desk via the housekeeping department," Mr. Martineau said. "As it should."

"It weren't my intention to have nobody see it," Jackie Bo said. "I just tryin' out my writin' hand is all."

"Be good enough to read what it says," Mr. Martineau said a bit sharply.

Jackie Bo frowned down at the slip of paper. "The readin' or the writin'?" he asked artlessly.

"The reading, I mean the printing, of course," snapped Mr. Martineau.

"Your . . . Comments . . . Please," Jackie Bo read in measured tones. "At the top in big letters. That what you mean?"

Mr. Martineau impatiently tapped the desk top with the pencil. "Under the little heading where we invite your comments, you will note, if you have eyes in your head, an italicized paragraph in smaller type which says—I'll recite it from memory." The chief of clerks closed his earnest eyes and reverently intoned: *"Pleasing our guests is the primary function of the Hotel Magnifico and its staff. You are a Very Important Person. Your opinion carries great weight with us. We therefore request that you take a few moments to answer*

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the following questions. Leave the completed questionnaire in a conspicuous place and the housekeeper will take care of it." Mr. Martineau opened his eyes smartly. "I trust that satisfactorily explains how this—this commentary came to my attention, Mister Jagger."

Jackie Bo hardly knew what to say because he could hardly sort out one word from another. Conspicuous, now he hadn't heard the like of that in all his born days. Conspicuous . . .

Mr. Martineau had gotten to his feet. "We are expected in Mister Littlejohn's office," he said. "Come with me, please."

Jackie Bo, dazed beyond recall, fell in behind Mr. Martineau and shuffled through the lobby. The new boots were rubbing up heel blisters that felt big as plums. At the elevator the chief of clerks and the VIP were met by a bellhop—not the scrawny old skit but a young one with face and shoulders like one solid block of timber attached to another—who bowed them aboard and accompanied them up to the mezzanine, and then marched behind them to an office door whose gold letters said *J. J. Littlejohn, Managing Director.*

Mr. Littlejohn sat at a desk twice the size of a church-social table. At a smaller desk to his right was a woman wearing short hair and a man's shirt and necktie.

"This is the guest I spoke to you about, sir," Mr. Martineau said. "J. B. Jagger. Room six six six. As of yesterday."

"Riffraff," Mr. Littlejohn said in a deep booming voice. His head was round as a pumpkin and near as bald. "Long hair. Dirty fingernails. Black boots. Let's see the questionnaire."

Jackie Bo's mouth gaped incomprehensively as the chief of clerks passed that little bitty paper over to the managing director.

Mr. Littlejohn scowled owlishly. "*Is this your first visit to the Magnifico?*" he read. "And, thank Jupiter, he's checked the *Yes* box. As for what prompted him to come here, it wasn't our road signs, our rates, our swimming pool, our advertising; it was, *check, the recommendation of others.*" Mr. Littlejohn looked up at Jackie Bo and, it seemed, plumb *into* him. "What others?" he boomed.

"I don't rightly git your meanin', sir?"

"Who recommended the Magnifico?"

"Well, I reckon Uncle Sam Sims. Leastwise—"

"What's he talking about, Martineau?"

"A man named Sims," Mr. Martineau said. "A local entrepreneur, one might say, special

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izing in a freakish form of folk music. He often takes a room here for a few days for one of his so-called discoveries."

Mr. Littlejohn glowered at everybody. "You mean Jigger here plays some bloody instrument?"

"Jagger," Jackie Bo said helpfully. "And yessir, I play the guitbox."

"Never heard of it," Mr. Littlejohn said, shifting his attention back to that little bitty paper. "But I know you, boy. I know your type. The clue is here." He contemptuously tapped the slip of paper with a forefinger. "Defiance of tradition. Revolt against the good things in life."

"You all sure mess me up, sir," Jackie Bo said.

"*We* mess *you* up." Mr. Littlejohn slapped a plump hand on his desk. "Here we are, a multi-million-dollar operation, in a state where culinary art has not evolved much beyond grits and chitterlings, and this unsanitary ridgerunner has the unmitigated gall to say we mess him up. Moreover, he has the gall on this questionnaire to belittle the cuisine in the best hotel within a radius of five hundred miles."

"Be dogged if I ain't messed, mister," Jackie Bo said helplessly.

"Hark!" Mr. Littlejohn said. "*What is your opinion of the food in the Hotel Magnifico?*" A rhetorical question which precedes four boxes, check one. *Superb.* No check. *Good.* No check. *Fair.* No check. *Poor?* And there you've made your mark, boy—the first such mark in the glorious history of this establishment since it was opened five years ago."

"A black day, indeed," murmured Mr. Martineau.

"Aye to that," stated the short-haired woman.

"The blackeye peas was all I meant," Jackie Bo said. "They want a mite of middlin' meat for real relishin'."

"The blackeye peas want middlin' meat," Mr. Littlejohn said. "The title of one of these nutty songs if I ever heard one. Unless it's nipped in the bud today, Martineau, every disc jockey in the area will be spinning it tomorrow."

"And the coffee wants a smidge of chicory," Jackie Bo said. "Elsewise the vittles eat right savory."

"There he goes again, running off at the mouth like every other two-bit bum in the country. It's got to be stamped out. You get my meaning, Martineau?"

"Quite clearly, sir."

"Then present him immediately to Monsieur Bernard. I'll phone down and explain the situation."

More bewildered than ever, Jackie Bo found himself a moment

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later going by service elevator into the vitals of the hotel. Flanked by the chief of clerks and the square-rigged bellhop, he got off amid a steamy clangor of kettles, fast-moving shoulder-borne trays, the brisk slam of oven doors, and an unrecognizable mixture of many voices and smells. Jackie Bo recognized only that he appeared to be walking through the biggest kitchen he ever saw or ever hoped to see.

Soon, with Mr. Martineau leading the way and the bellhop just about counting cadence in the rear, Jackie Bo suddenly left the kitchen behind by passing over a wide wooden threshold and into a room with sawdust on the floor and nary a window and chilly as a night of first frost. Skinned pink and cleanly quartered, hogs, sheep and cows hung by steel hooks from the grooved rafters.

The only thing alive in the place, Jackie Bo noticed, was a short broad man with a face as red as a boiled beet and eyes as pale and puckerish as white prunes. He wore a tall white hat and a white apron tied high on his chest. In one hamlike hand he held a cleaver, in the other a close-honed gutting knife akin to the one Paw always used when a sow'd been stunned by the big hammer. And there, that's where the middlin' meat come from, down there a whit inside the underbelly. He'd tell these citified folks as much as soon's he stopped shiverin' from this cold old room.

"Good afternoon, monsieur," Mr. Martineau was saying. "I believe Mister Littlejohn has just been in touch with you."

"Mais oui. And zees is za subject?"

"Correct, monsieur."

The high-hatted man smiled benignly at Jackie Bo. "Zees skinny wan, he lak za fat fwom a peeg in *les pois chiches noirs*. Not so?"

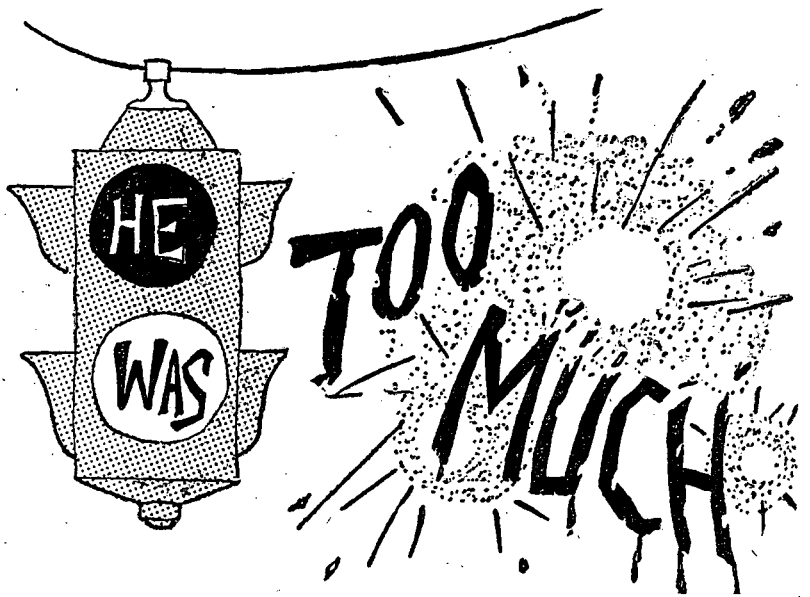
"Something like that," Mr. Martineau replied. "Well, monsieur, we'll leave him in your hands."

"So be it," the high-hatted man said, meticulously wiping a scrap of suet off a well-worn chopping block. "And za door close tight-tight after you. Adieu."



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There is said to be little value to that which can be lost; it is the intangibles which are irreplaceable.



A CROWD had begun to gather at the edge of the highway on the northern outskirts of the small Florida town. Two police cruisers were there, and an unmarked car which had brought detectives.

An ambulance had also arrived and stood ready to remove the body which lay sprawled under a tan blanket between the gleaming white convertible and an aging green sedan.

It was just past noon on a day in July and the sun was a relentless torch in a smothering chamber of humidity. Traffic groped north and

by Robert Colby

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south through the aisle of hastily-parked vehicles hugging the shoulders of the narrow highway. Approaching cars slowed, as people gaped from their windows, then wheeled past uncertainly or braked to add their startled faces to the scene of violence.

Ken Stover, a lean, dark-haired man of thirty with a young face and ancient dark eyes, sagged against a fender of his sedan. A few tears of blood had trickled down from a cut under his left eye to mingle with the sweat which shined his pale features.

"You better start makin' sense, mister," the detective sergeant told him. "I don't believe a word you say. This don't look like any traffic squabble where you beat a perfect stranger to death. This was a planned killing."

The sergeant, a chunky, balding man in a rumpled brown suit, had thick lips and flat brown eyes. There was bloat in his face and at the belly; he seemed a man who had once been solid and muscular but was going to seed.

"If you don't make sense soon," he continued in his mildly accented, deceptively soft voice, "we're gonna build a nice fat case of murder one around you."

"You knew this guy," said the tall, blond detective with the pocked face and the pink-rimmed, liquid gray eyes. "You knew him and you hated his guts. So you followed him all the way from Miami, and when you caught up with him you went crazy. You beat his brains out. You clobbered him until he was dead because you were jealous and you—"

"It was the girl here, wasn't it?" interrupted the chunky sergeant, turning toward a slender redhead who drooped beside him, biting her lip, nervously toying with the clasp of her purse. She had green, amber-flecked eyes, provocatively slanted, a small flaring nose, a wide abundant mouth, all set neatly in the precise heart of her freckled face.

Her delicate skin, peeling at the top rise of her cheeks, bore the blush of a recent sunburn. She wore a bargain-basement sun dress and cheap tan-and-white shoes, badly scuffed. Nothing but her good looks belonged with the sleek white convertible, though she had been beside the dead man who drove it.

Ken Stover looked at the girl briefly. "I told you," he said wearily, "I don't know the lady. I don't know her and I didn't know her husband, friend, whoever he was."

"Boyfriend," said the blond detective with a sage look. "And you know *her*, that's for sure."

Stover sighed heavily, shaking

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his head. "Think what you like, then."

"I never saw him before in my life," the girl said, "but he could have been an old enemy of Mr. Belanger's."

"You're both liars," said the sergeant. "Any halfwit could see that you two go together like John and Mary, and the dead man, older, and rich as you two are poor, got in the way of Stover's jealous rage. Or maybe you two were a pair workin' some kind of con game that got out of control."

"What did you mean," the blond detective asked the girl, "when you said Stover here could have been an enemy of Belanger's?"

"Well—" She moistened her sun-parched lips. "Marvin—Mr. Belanger—ran a big trucking company, and he'd been having union troubles. He told me he had a lot of enemies in his business, some he didn't even know. This man could be one of them."

"How do you like that?" said the sergeant. "When the chips are down she throws him to the wolves."

"No," denied the girl, "he's a stranger. But it wasn't just an ordinary fist fight that got out of hand, like this man wants you to believe. I could tell from the beginning that he meant to kill Mr. Belanger, after he goaded him into a fight. He came at him like—like an animal, a savage! Nothing could have stopped him until poor Marvin was dead. Oh, he—he was a brute, a determined killer!"

"Answer that one," said the sergeant to Stover. "You must have been steaming up a long time or you would have bounced Belanger a couple of times and walked away, instead of pounding him again and again until he was dead. Now that makes sense."

"It wasn't like that at all," Stover replied stridently, a kind of desperate sobbing undertone to his speech. "I was in the middle of town at a red light. The light had hardly switched to green when he leaned on that big horn, right in my ear. Three long blasts. Then he pulled ahead fast and cut me off, still blowing the horn. So when we came abreast at another light and he began to cuss me out—"

"Yeah, you told us all that," said the sergeant. "A man blows his horn, gives you some lip, and that's all you need to maul him to death. I don't believe it. Never! Why, if you got shook that easy, went maniac every time some joe chewed you out in traffic, you'd have been put away long ago. Nope, can't be that simple. I just don't buy it, Stover."

"Well," Stover said, "I don't know how else to explain it—ex-

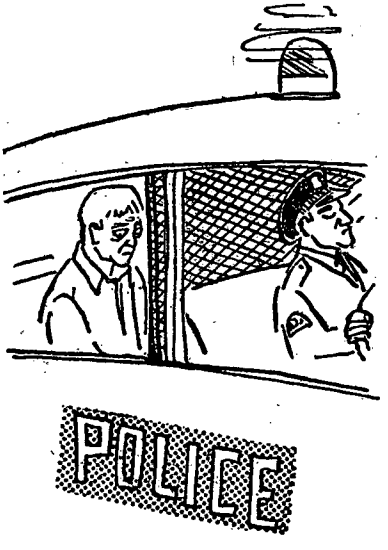
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cept that this guy was too much, that's all. He was just too much."

That was when they put him in back of one of the patrol cars and the uniformed cop drove him away. The detectives followed, bringing the girl. Ken figured they wanted to question her alone, en-route to the station.

The police car had a screen of rugged steel mesh separating the driver from the prisoner, and the rear doors could not be opened from the inside. The compartment was aptly referred to as "the cage."

The cop, appearing neat and official in his tan uniform despite the soggy steam bath of heat, did not once turn around during the ride, showing Ken nothing but the anonymous back of his head and the rigid column of his neck. That, compounded by the nearly soundless whisper of the tires and the flat empty face of the limp tropic landscape, gave Stover a shuddering sense of his own isolation.



Finding it impossible to lean back as if he were being conveyed in a taxi, he sat uncomfortably on the edge of his seat and stared out a window as they entered the first dreary streets of the town. Sweltering far inland from the ocean and the manicured ivory beaches, its squat, tired buildings had not been rejuvenated by the money-green blood of the tourists.

Looking out upon this town which less than an hour ago had been merely an irritation, a fly in his progress northward, Stover now saw it as his final destination, his Hades at the terminus of a tortured existence. As the police car turned into a side street and braked before a yellow-brick tomb of a building, he was overcome by an unspeakable despair.

The room to which they took him was small, its dusky interior faintly described by the light from a single barred window. Containing only a battered desk and a quartet of scarred wooden chairs, the place was a hot airless coffin which smelled of decay and sweat.

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Ken was motioned to a chair by the desk, the sergeant and his blond partner removed their coats, rolled shirtsleeves high over bulging biceps. They did this with deliberation, in ominous silence, ignoring his presence.

The blond cop sank into a chair, stretched his legs and crossed ankles before lighting a cigarette.

The sergeant widened the gap in the partially opened window, and peered stonily from the window, hands on hips. Turning, he fingered the butt of his .38 as he crossed to the desk and leaned against it, facing Ken.

"Well now," he said, "maybe you can straight-talk us in here. Nice and quiet, nobody to disturb us. No dames to distract us—like that hot-eyed redhead." He watched Ken with narrowed eyes, twitching his nose, scratching the rim of a nostril with a thumbnail. "What's her name, that cookie?"

"I don't know her name," Ken said in a tired monotone.

"Sure you do. Lois Detman. She was old stuff to you long before she picked up Belanger in Miami Beach at that hotel bar. Man, that's a lotta woman, don't ya think, Harry?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Harry, sending a smoke ring out to circle his agreement.

The sergeant, lacing fingers behind his head, eyed Ken, winked. "Don't you think she's a lotta woman, Stover?"

"I didn't notice. Couldn't care less. You're wasting your time in that direction, Sergeant."

"She picked up Belanger in the hotel bar where he was staying," said the blond Harry, summarizing. "Belanger was on a business trip. He was married, kids and all. Lois didn't care, he had dough. The boyfriend, Stover here, was tapped out, broke.

"Lois and Belanger do the town, make a night of it. He's sold. So he says, 'Baby, you've got it for me. Drive up to New York with old Sugar Bags and I'll set up a nest for you across town from the Belanger penthouse. Just so mama don't get wise. You dance to my tune and you'll have all the sugar you can spread around, baby.'

"So they hit the road together fast. But Stover sniffs the scent in a hurry. He takes after them, hate burning his brain. He stirs up a fight and it's a goodbye Belanger."

"That's a lie," said Ken flatly. "Belanger stirred up the fight."

"Sure—after you held him at the light and needled him into it."

"His death was an accident," pleaded Ken in a choked voice. "I'm sorry I killed him, I admit killing him. What more do you want?"

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"*Why* did you kill him?" pressed the sergeant.

"I don't know, I don't know! I was in a rage. He wasn't even a person. He was a thing—a force—and I killed it."

The sergeant glanced at his partner. "Maybe this guy needs a skull shrinker," he said.

"Yeah, or else he's faking."

"That won't work with us," the sergeant declared. "We'll turn him inside out until we get the truth.

"Listen, Stover, we might be able to give you a break. Tell the truth, plead guilty and we'll try to get you off with life. But if it goes to trial you're a dead duck. They'll burn you to a cinder. Well?"

Ken said nothing.

"Let's book him and toss him in a cage," Harry said. "Maybe he'll sing another song if we let him think it over in one of our deluxe private rooms."

The sergeant pursed his lips, nodded. "Now Stover, one more time. Why did you kill the man?"

Ken looked into their blank faces and knew it was hopeless. Even if he had a week for the telling, how could he explain what he didn't quite understand himself to men like these? So again he was silent.

"Maybe we're pushing too hard," said the blond detective in a falsely soothing voice. "The poor guy is simply mixed up. Start from the beginning, Ken. Nice 'n easy. Tell us where you first met Marvin Belanger and how you got involved with him."

Stover sighed. "I told you before, I never knew Belanger. He was a complete stranger."

Belanger had reminded Ken of his father, a man of bullish arrogance, calculated cruelty and sneering contempt.

When Ken was thirteen his mother, who was forty-three but looked sixty, died an alcoholic. She was a sensitive, compassionate person and they were very close. From little things she said when she was tight, from fragments overheard, Ken learned that his father's many cruelties and his sly meetings with Rita Barnes, a widowed neighbor, had caused his mother's drinking.

Ken's father did not drink and would not trust his mother with more than a dollar because he said she would disgrace him at some local bar. But mysteriously, his mother produced a full bottle of whisky nearly every morning.

After the funeral Ken's father, in rare good spirits, had unlocked a steel cabinet to reveal row upon row of tall whisky bottles containing the amber liquid which day-by-day had erased the bright true image of his mother.

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Cradling a bottle in his big paw, his father told Ken, "Just rot-gut, but it cost me plenty over a long period. Every morning I put a fresh bottle beside the sink. That way, she had a choice: Drink it, or pour it down the drain." He grinned evilly. "Well, my boy, she made her choice, wouldn't you say?"

Right then, if there had been a gun within reach, Ken would joyfully have killed his father.

That evening, Rita Barnes, the brunette with the clever face and the funny little smile that was like a smirk, had cooked their dinner and sat boldly at table. Three days later, Ken was shipped off to a military academy in Virginia.

The detective lighted a cigarette and studied it as if it might tell him something. "You're not helping your cause one bit, Stover," he said. "Silence is practically an admission of guilt, and lies can be checked. You'll hold us up for a few hours maybe, but we'll soon have your whole history on paper, line-by-line. We'll know you better than your own mother. We'll know every time you were a bad boy from year one. Right, Harry?"

"I'd bet my life on it," said Harry, "and his too. "What's your name, Stover? Your *real* name?"

"Ken Stover. It's on my driver's license. Verify it for yourself."

"You can fake all kinds of ID, friend, but your fingerprints don't lie. Chances are a guy like you has got a record somewhere. We don't need a name. Your prints will dig it up."

"You can't dig up what doesn't exist," Ken answered, but suddenly he was in doubt. How far back could they reach? There was that brief incredible period when he actually did time with a Carolina chain gang.

He had run away from the military academy when he was barely sixteen. At that time he was slim and frail and badly equipped for a life which emphasized brute force and competitive sports. Because he spent his free time alone, reading, or writing mawkish poems, he was goaded into many a punishing fight.

One night his poems were stolen and the next morning the most revealing of his purple passages screamed at him from the blackboard when he entered his classroom for the study of the *History of Modern Warfare*. By noon a dozen copies of the complete farce, the whole dreadful unveiling of his soul, were being circulated around the academy.

There was no place to hide, so that winter night he stole away

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and joined a couple of semi-bums riding a freight car south. Caught in North Carolina, they were sentenced to thirty days in the county chain gang.

Ken was the immediate target for the perverse attentions of Bull Whitlock, leader of the hard-core nucleus of habitual criminals, and Ken naively informed the guard. In the morning, just after the road gang dismounted from their trucks, Whitlock broke Ken's nose with the big sledge of his fist, fractured his jaw and kicked in a couple of ribs. Half a dozen Whitlock followers swore that the fight started when Ken tried to brain Whitlock with an outsized rock.

After Ken returned from the prison hospital he was found guilty of assault with a deadly weapon, and the penalty for having been beaten half to death and railroaded was six additional months at hard labor.

"You tell us you've got no record," Harry said, "but I don't believe you. I believe your mouth but not your eyes. You've been busted, Stover, that's for certain. You're an ex-con. You've been in and out plenty of times."

"No," said Ken hesitantly, "that's not true. When I was just a kid I got caught riding a freight and they gave me some time in a chain gang. But that doesn't make me a criminal."

No use telling the rest of it, he thought. They would only use it to try to needle him into a confession. Anyway, he was weary of the whole business. He was tired; tired in the way that his mother had been tired. What could these cops know about that kind of tiredness?

"If you're not a criminal," said the sergeant, "then you've got a job. You're an ordinary, decent citizen with an honest job. What sort of work do you do?"

"I'm a salesman. An auto salesman."

"An auto salesman," the sergeant sneered. "They're all auto salesmen. It's an easy out."

"He's an auto salesman but he drives a limping old heap," Harry snorted. "You ever see a car trader who didn't wheel the latest thing in chrome, even if he didn't own it?"

"If you have a job selling cars," the sergeant reasoned, "what're you doing in Florida with New York tags? You don't work around here." He grinned scornfully. "Are you on vacation?"

"He's on a permanent vacation," said Harry, chuckling.

"Give me facts," the sergeant said. "Give me names and places. What outfit do you work for? In

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what city? And for how long?"

"I used to work for Dawson Motors in Buffalo, New York."

"You *used* to work, huh? At—?"

"Dawson Motors, Buffalo."

"We'll check that. We'll check that out pronto, don't you worry."

After he had served his sentence, Ken hitched a ride north. The man and his wife were headed for Buffalo, and Ken went along. One place was as good as another.

He got a job as a bag-boy in a supermarket and began to put on weight. Encouraged, he went twice a week to a gym where he worked out vigorously, He lifted weights and took boxing lessons. His trainer said he had real talent for the ring but he wanted nothing more than to look at any man without fear, knowing he could defend himself.

Time passed, he became a checker, then left the market to sell cars for Dawson Motors. Gil Dawson, the sales manager, son of the owner, was not much older than Ken. With dark, wavy hair and a lazy, brilliant smile that came easily to his handsome face, he was liked by everyone, including Ken, though it was more than a year before Ken was willing to admit it.

Gil had taken Ken under his wing, teaching him all the tricks, making him one of the top salesmen. When the exposure of time did not produce the expected cracks in Gil's character, Ken happily accepted him as his first real friend. Through Gil, Ken met a few girls, made his first dates, and began to free himself from the fears which had made him a loner.

The sergeant turned from the window. "The trouble started with Lois Detman," he said. "Didn't it, Stover? You loved her. You did everything for her. Maybe you even stole the money to keep her in style. But when you were broke, what did she do? She ran off with moneybags Belanger, a married man cheating on his wife.

"So he became your worst enemy. It was the most natural thing in the world for a guy like you to track him down and kill him. Isn't that the story? C'mon now, it'll do you good to talk it out. You got nothin' to lose, nothin' at all."

"Why don't you leave me alone?" Ken said weakly, his spirit drained. "You want me to make something up to satisfy you? The fight happened the way I told you. I didn't know Belanger, I didn't know the girl."

In his whole life, Ken had known but two or three girls well, and only one intimately. She was

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now Shirley Stover, nee McCullen.

Ken was twenty-three when he met Shirley at a New Year's Eve party. She was a quiet blonde of twenty-two with earnest, unblinking azure eyes, a little ski-dip nose, and a pensive-sweet delicate mouth.

For Ken it was love at first sight. The relationship got off to a slow start because he could not shake the habit of keeping his back to the wall, but Shirley understood his sensitive areas and she was patient. Late in that spring they were married. They bought a small house in the suburbs; Gil Dawson and his wife became their best friends.

When Gil's father died, Gil brought Ken to his plush inherited office, fixed a drink and toasted Ken in as the new sales manager.

In his late twenties, with eight thousand in the bank and a devoted wife, Ken believed it was going to be good all the rest of the way, but when he was nudging thirty there was a shift in Shirley's attitude toward him. At first cool and remote, she began to argue over trifles, ballooning petty irritations into scathing fights, denouncing his faults, hurling senseless accusations.

Ken decided to give the marriage a boost by taking Shirley on a long second honeymoon, but on the day he rushed home excitedly to tell her of his plans, he found Shirley gone. With her went his new car and all of his eight thousand blood-sweat savings, withdrawn from their joint bank account.

Left behind was a curt note stating that the marriage had failed and Shirley was filing for a divorce in Florida. She did not want to see him again, they would communicate only through her lawyer in Fort Lauderdale.

Everything went bad after that. Ken could not sleep or eat, he performed his job as sales manager mechanically. The absence of Shirley made him an abject third wheel at the Dawsons' house, and though Gil and his wife could not have been more sympathetic, their togetherness only reminded Ken that he was alone. He stopped visiting them altogether.

A uniformed officer stepped into the room. "I got a call for you, Sergeant," he said. "It's from New York," he added, looking pointedly at Ken. "Also, there's a teletype from Miami."

The sergeant told his partner to take over and went out behind the officer.

"You see?" said the detective the minute the door had shut. "Al-

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ready they're hot on your trail. Okay, so you don't want to talk about the dame. How about Belanger? You ready to change your story?"

"No."

"Why did you really kill him?"

"Same reasons I gave you."

"What about the job? You sold cars, Belanger ran a trucking outfit. That's pretty close. Was he moving hot cars? Did you work for him on the side?"

"Never."

"How long did you stay with—" he consulted a notebook, "this Dawson Motors in Buffalo?"

"A little over eight years."

"Dawson used his business to unload stolen cars and you helped him. Isn't that so?"

"That's absurd."

"Why did you leave him after eight years?"

"I had some personal problems that interfered with my work."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No. I don't want to talk at all —about anything."

On the day before Gil was to leave for Detroit, going to a dealer's convention and remaining for a visit, he'd sent a secretary to ask Ken to come to his office. It seemed a formal, stuffy kind of summons, out of character. Why didn't Gil, as usual, just pick up the phone, or step down the hall to see him?

Ken had a sudden painful hunch. And he was right.

"Can't say how sorry I am about this, Ken," said Gil, toying with his pen, chewing his lip, "especially since I know it isn't your fault. But you *have* been pretty lax, old buddy." A quick slash of smile. "Some of the boys have complained, customers too.

"Despite my strong personal feelings and your . . . tragic problem, we have to run a tight ship. Since I'll be gone quite awhile, we'll need to have someone in charge who . . . Of course if you would consider stepping down to straight sales . . . But I think that would be pretty awkward all around, don't you?"

Back in his office Ken felt as if something whirling madly inside him were going to tear loose and break him apart. He sat at his desk and wrote Shirley, telling her that unless she agreed to see him at once he would contest the divorce, fight the settlement, the whole rotten business.

He got a quick answer to that one! She said it was useless but he could come if he liked. There was a Lauderdale address and a phone number. He could call on arrival.

Since Shirley had about ninety percent of his cash he couldn't afford to fly. Anyway, he needed a

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car. Since he had turned in the company car he'd been using, he bought the secondhand sedan.

He left that afternoon and drove non-stop, arriving early the next evening. He checked into a cheap motel, took a quick shower and called Shirley. She came on strong over the line, would see him in the morning, but he told her he couldn't endure waiting another moment.

It was a small but quite splendid apartment overlooking the ocean. He sat down nervously, studying her as she made him a drink. He told her she looked beautiful, she told him he looked very tired, and neither had exaggerated.

"I don't know why you came," she opened coolly. "It's all been said, it's all been done. Anything else is an anti-climax."

"I want you to come back," he said. "I don't care on what basis, I want you back. I need you. Oh, how I need you, baby!"

"What about *my* needs?" she said sharply. "I don't *want* to come back to you."

"Shirley, what changed you?" he asked her, his voice splintering with fatigue and love hunger. "How could all the years of loving you go by without leaving any impression? Laughter and tears together, success and failure, touching in the night, holding each other, talking our special language in the darkness . . . How close we were!

"Shirley, that was you, wasn't it? Where did you go? Don't you know I love you? I never stopped for a minute!"

"Love is a delicate flower," she said. "You trample it too often and it dies. Every time we fought, every time we cut each other up with words, it died a little. Until it just —ended."

He nodded. "I'm—I'm sorry about the fights," he said, "but I never honestly felt that they were *my* fights. I simply answered wild accusations, sometimes with anger and cruelty, I'll admit."

She was silent.

"Will you come back to me?"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "Never."

She had put down her drink and was reaching for a cigarette when suddenly he pulled her close. He began to cry softly against her shoulder. She neither held him comfortingly nor pushed him away. She simply sat.

In a moment he said chokingly, "I—I was never quite alive, never quite whole, until I met you. I couldn't feel, or love, or trust. Oh, baby, don't leave me, don't let me die again . . ."

"I'm sorry for you, Ken," she said, "but life to me is not self-

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sacrifice and I must live it the way I please. We were a nice, comfortable habit that went sour, that's all. And now I've kept my promise and I do wish you'd leave . . ."

The next morning, Ken drove north on route 27, gutted, tired to the soul of his being. The summer heat was at first irritating, then unbearable. It seemed to seep inside his skull, squeezing his brain, restoring his rage.

He swept through the Everglades, came to the broken, dirty little town and the first traffic light. He didn't notice the man and the girl behind him in the big air-conditioned convertible with the electric windows sealed—not until he heard the angry determined blare of the horn and looked in the rearview mirror.

He saw that the light had changed but he delayed a few seconds out of spite, taking off slowly.

The white convertible swung sharply in front of him, cutting him off, sassing him with more horn, burning ahead, only to jolt-stop at another light, where Ken pulled abreast.

The man pushed his little button and the window obeyed with a quick descent. The stranger looked cool and had the scrubbed-pink shine of money, the indignant, self-seeking jaw of power and aggression, the challenging, disdainful eyes of the bully, a man like his father.

"Keep outta my way, you dumb cracker," he snarled.

Seething in the revitalized juices of a hundred hates, Ken shouted, "How would you like to have your ugly face punched in, mister!" Then he shoved ahead, slowed to a crawl, blocking the convertible behind him.

He felt his nerves dance in his fingers with the need to smash something or someone—anyone! He was just going to teach that creep a lesson, then give him back the road in another quarter mile. He wasn't surprised this time when he heard the horn, expecting it, but when the ape glued his paw to it, held it frozen until there wasn't another sound in the world, it was too much.

Ken braked sharply, causing the convertible to jab his bumper and slide to a halt. They both leaped out at the same instant, the man shedding his coat to the pavement as he strode toward Ken, flexing his muscles. The guy was big, a burly sort who looked as if he had been weaned on the blood of street fights, though he was older, somewhere in his forties.

Ken was not awed by his size, his muscular development, his hurtling confidence. He felt nothing but a red-blazing hunger for the

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feel of his fist smashing against flesh and bone.

They came together with the stranger rocking Ken solidly under the eye; which was like detonating the really big bomb inside him, the one charged with a whole lifetime of abuses unpunished.

How measureless, how terrifyingly destructive was the everlastingly contained anger which now exploded in the pounding of Ken's fists against the composite face of his enemy; his fury at last unbridled as he wildly, sobbingly clubbed and battered unspeakable treachery and cruelty too long endured. Belanger, pummeled back against the grille of his own convertible, hung suspended for one awful moment. Then, emptied of his mortality, slithered to earth.

The sergeant came back into the room. "We don't know *all* of it yet," he said to Ken. "Just a matter of time. But we got the first reports on you and we know one thing, buddy; you been lyin', that's for sure!"

"Maybe we should beat the truth outta his hide," the detective said.

Ken sat up, felt the first angry stab of rebellion. "Why don't you just try that?" he challenged.

"This is your last chance to play ball," said the sergeant. "Now, Stover, I'm gonna be fair with you and tell you we already found out that you knew Belanger. Maybe it had nothing to do with the girl, but you had a great big smoldering hate for *him*. Isn't that right? C'mon now, admit it. You knew Belanger, didn't you?"

Ken stared at the sergeant, nodded slowly. "Yeah," he said, "I knew him. You got a cigarette?"

"Sure, sure," said the sergeant eagerly, reaching into his pocket. "Here, I got half a pack I don't need. Take it."

Ken reached for the pack, removed a cigarette. The blond detective quickly gave him a light.

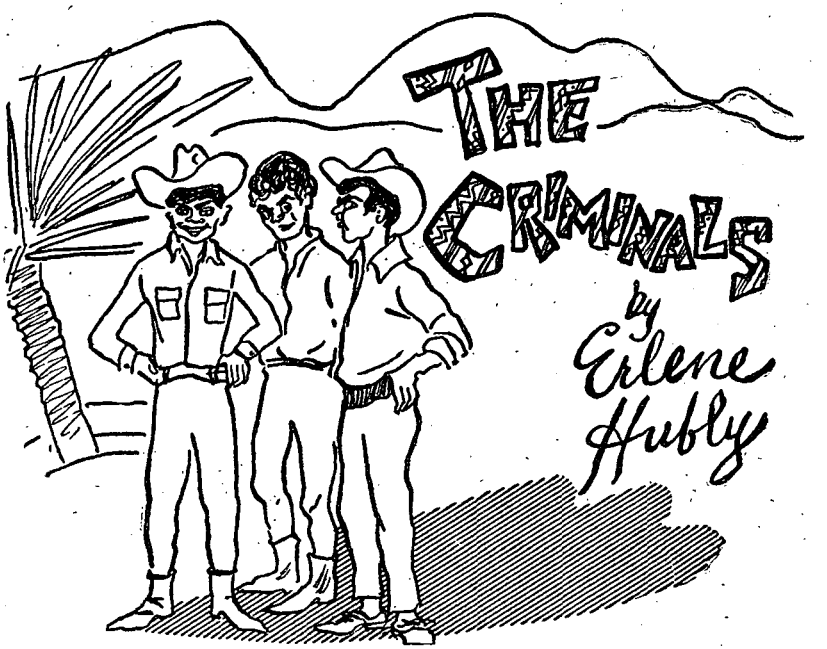
"So you really *did* know Belanger," the sergeant said with barely contained excitement.

"That's right," Ken replied. "I knew Belanger. I knew him well. The whole world is full of Belangers—and today I killed them all."



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Neither criminal nor good neighbor, suffice it to say, wears an identification tag.



I HAD just come in from swimming when the whole thing started. I had run into the bathroom, leaving a wet trail behind me, slapped my two-piece bathing suit over the side of the tub, and turned on the hottest water I could stand because the swim had made me feel like I owned the world and all the hot water in it. Then I heard Mother yell from the hallway.

"Do you want yardwork?" she called. "Is that why you're here—yardwork?"

I lathered soap under my arm and wondered who she was talking to, then I rinsed off and stepped out of the shower. Wrapping a large bath towel around my body, I walked out into the hall-

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way and looked at Mother. She had parted the curtains of the hall window and was staring out into the yard.

"Out there," she pointed.

Peering through the window, I saw three men standing under one of the pecan trees that shaded our summer home in the Texas hill country.

"What do you want?" Mother called again.

The three boys—I could see now that they were teenage boys—looked at one another, and the one in the middle yelled something unintelligible. That's when I realized they were Mexicans.

"They haven't understood a word you've said," I laughed. "Probably just up from Mexico and hungry as hell. I'll go make some coffee."

"No," Mother said, moving away from the window. "I'll go get your father."

She started down the hallway, then turned toward me again.

"Get some clothes on," she said. "There's no sense in your standing there in nothing, just asking for trouble."

I went back into the bathroom and tugged a large terry-cloth robe over my shoulders, getting the chain to a gold cross I always wore all mixed up in the robe's collar. I was half amused, half annoyed at Mother's comment. Lately, ever since she'd turned fifty, there seemed to be so little joy in her life. It was as if suddenly the only subject that interested her was death.

Once back in my room, I settled on my bed in front of the large picture window and picked up the book I'd been studying before my swim—*Guide to College Level Psychology*. In the other bedroom I could hear Mother and my father talking, arguing about something. I looked out the window again. The boys were still standing about twenty feet away under the tree—not talking, just standing there quietly. The one on the end, the biggest of the three, was staring toward my window.

"He's going out there," Mother said, coming back into my bedroom. "Your father's going to talk to them."

I smiled to myself; Daddy's knowledge of Spanish would barely get him through the menu of an American-Mexican restaurant. I saw him walk to where the boys were standing and then I heard one of them say, "San Antonio."

"That's all that's wrong," I explained. "They're lost. They're trying to get to San Antonio."

Mother sat down in the rocker across from my bed and began rocking. She hadn't taken her eyes

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off the boys since she'd entered the room.

"That's the trouble today," she said. "People come up to you and you don't know whether they're going to shake your hand or kill you. You can't trust anyone. What kind of a world is that to live in, where you can't trust anyone?"

Her rocking was beginning to get on my nerves.

"For heaven's sake, Mother. They're just lost."

"Lost? But why all the way out here? We're miles from any town, any city. Why out here—unless they came for some reason?"

"Mother, that's what getting lost is all about—wandering off, miles from anything."

"And I don't like their looks. The one on the end—the big one—hasn't stopped looking at you since he got here."

"Oh, Mother, they're only kids. The oldest one can't be—"

"Don't try to tell me age has anything to do with it. Two *fourteen*-year-olds murdered seven people in that state park north of here just last month. Remember? Shot the whole family while they were sleeping, and for no reason at all. Don't try to tell me anything about *boys!*"

Looking out the window again, I saw Daddy squatting in the dirt with them, drawing a straight line with a stick while talking calmly.

"He must be having a hard time trying to talk to them."

Mother didn't answer, just kept rocking. Then I saw the boy on the end, the big one, slowly get up from the group. He took a step toward me.

Mother got up from her rocker. "I don't like this one bit," she said.

The fear in her voice unnerved me. She walked into the other bedroom and I heard her fumbling around; it sounded like she was clanking two pieces of metal together.

The boy was still coming toward me, but he stopped just short of the window. I could see his face—dark brown and almost all nose, his nostrils stretching across to his cheekbones. He seemed to be breathing deeply, and for the first time all day I was aware of my naked body touching against the nub of the terrycloth robe.

Before I could move, he pointed at me with his little finger—the other three were missing—and said something. I looked down and saw that he was pointing to the cross I was wearing, the little gold one whose chain had been tangled up in my collar. He moved closer, still pointing, until his face was right outside my window.

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"Gold?" he asked, his nostrils flaring. "Gold?" he repeated, pointing to the cross.

I nodded, and he grinned. He made a clicking noise with his tongue, turned and walked back to where the others were still squatting. One of the boys said something to him and he sat down. Then he looked toward me and made that clicking sound again with his tongue. I moved toward the edge of the bed.

"Are you all right?" Mother asked me as she came back into the room. She went over to the window and looked out.

"Yes, Mother," I said, trying to clear my throat. "My cross, he just wanted to . . ." I couldn't finish the sentence.

"Your father's been out there too long," Mother said, going over to the rocker. "He's had more than enough time to tell them how to get to San Antonio."

She sat down, but didn't start rocking this time; just sat there, her eyes on the boys. I edged off the bed and as I got up I saw the gun. She had it concealed under the folds of her skirt. Our eyes met but neither of us said a word. Then slowly she placed her hand over the fold. She had never shot a gun in her life.

Suddenly I felt sick but I couldn't say anything. That was the awful part. I couldn't tell her to put it away.

I left my room and walked into the other bedroom. I quietly worked my way up to the window and peered through the curtain. Daddy and the boys were still squatting, but suddenly one of the boys passed under the window and moved around to the front of the house. He looked at something in the front yard, then stopped. I edged up to the front window. I was so close to him now I could hear his breathing, and saw what he was looking at—our swimming pool. I heard him make a sort of whistling sound between his teeth as he walked back to where the others were still crouched. He nudged the one on the end and said something to him. The two boys stood up, and all of them came around to the front of the house, looked at the pool and started talking softly to one another.

I couldn't understand a word at first, but finally distinguished *rico,* Spanish for "rich." They turned and faced Daddy and said the word again. *"Rico."*

I moved away from the window, tiptoed across the room and took the rifle down from the gun rack. I quickly loaded it, ten cartridges in the magazine, then gently placed it on the bed and put a

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pillow over the chamber area so I could muffle the sound as I cocked it. I took the safety off and returned to the window. The boys had stopped about ten feet away from my father.

One of them said something to Daddy, and it must have been about the pool because they were facing that direction. The biggest of the boys, the one who had been looking at me, walked over to the tree and began stripping leaves off its branches. He said something to Daddy, gruff sounding, and then Daddy came toward the house.

Mother was the first to meet him; she still had the gun in her hand. I decided to leave my rifle in the bedroom. Somehow, now that my father was returning to the house, I no longer felt I needed it. He had never been afraid of anything.

"I don't like it," Mother said as Daddy banged in through the screen door. "Tell them to leave."

Daddy looked at her, the perspiration running in long streaks down his tan shirt. He saw her gun, looked at her, then moved toward the kitchen.

"They want something to eat," he said, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "Food."

"I'm not *about* to feed them," Mother answered. "They've been here long enough."

"I don't think they've eaten for several days. They're just over from Mexico."

"I knew it!" Mother said. "In this country illegally. *Criminals.*"

Daddy moved toward the refrigerator. "We'll have to give them something."

"We have no obligation whatsoever to feed them. If anything, we ought to call the sheriff. He's the one who should take care of them."

"We've got to act like decent human beings. They haven't eaten for days."

"Why should *we* act like decent human beings. *They* certainly aren't."

He didn't answer her, only opened the refrigerator and pulled out a can of peaches and a slab of cold roast beef.

"Anyway," he finally said, slicing off a piece of meat, "it'll be easier *after* we've fed them to tell them to leave."

"Easier? It's easy now. Even *I* know *that* Mexican word. *Vamos!*"

He got three paper plates and began piling pieces of roast beef on them. "All right," he said. "Then *you* tell them. Go right out there yourself and tell them to leave."

I walked over to where Daddy was standing and opened the can of peaches. "You're not afraid, are

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you?" I asked. "I mean, they're only kids."

He didn't answer, just took the can out of my hand and began spearing the peaches onto the paper plates. He didn't look at me.

"I'll go out with you," I said, moving toward the door. "I'll get my rifle, just in case—"

He cut me off, his voice angry. "No. I don't want you out there." He picked up the plates, balancing two in his left hand. "And I don't need any guns!" he added. Then he moved toward the hallway.

I went into my parents' bedroom and sat down on the bed in front of the window. I had never seen my father afraid before. I picked up my rifle. "Damn those boys," I said to myself. "Damn them."

"Just leave the plates on the ground," I heard Mother yell out from the kitchen, "and tell them to leave when they've finished." As Daddy went out the screen door, she added, "And you come on back in. You've been out there long enough."

I watched my father go to the boys and set the plates down at their feet, but no one reached for the food. Daddy said something, and finally one boy started picking at his meat with a fork. Suddenly the boy on the end seemed interested in something behind the trees and walked over to where our car was parked. He ran his hand over one of the bronze fenders, turned and looked at Daddy. Slowly he began moving around the car, dragging his finger over its bronzed surface. Then he came back to where my father was standing.

"Cadillac?" the boy asked.

My father nodded.

The boys looked at one another, and the biggest boy said something in Spanish. Daddy didn't answer, just bent down, picked up the paper plates, and returned to the house.

"They want our car," Mother said, meeting him at the door. "They're going to try and steal our car."

Daddy passed by me without speaking, went into the kitchen and dumped the plates into the garbage container. "Here are the forks they used," he said, laying them on the counter. "You might wash them well before we use them again."

Mother picked up the forks, careful not to touch their prongs, and threw them into the garbage pail.

I went into my parents' bedroom again and over to the window. The three boys were by the car, looking at it.

"They want a ride down to the

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San Antone highway," I heard Daddy say in the other room. "They think they can hitch the rest of the way."

"No," Mother said.

"It's the easiest way to get rid of them," Daddy answered. "I can take them down to the junction and dump them off there."

He moved past her and came into the bedroom. He didn't look at me, just reached over and grabbed his car keys off the key rack.

"No," Mother repeated, stepping into the doorway to block his leaving. "If you take them," she said, her voice breaking, "if you go, I'll never, never . . ." Suddenly her body seemed to bend in the middle and she leaned against the door frame. "I'll never . . ."

Daddy turned toward me. "I'm not afraid to go with them," he said.

"I know," I answered, catching the uncertainty in his voice but not wanting him to know I had. "But don't go, please don't go."

He looked at me for a long time and I dropped my eyes. Suddenly he threw his keys on the bed. "Maybe you're right. Maybe it is time to ask them to leave."

"Daddy," I said as he moved toward the door. "Maybe you should take a gun . . ."

He looked at me, finally nodded, and went over to his dresser drawer. He got out his pistol, pushed the clip into the handle, and left the room. As he passed under the window outside, I could see the gun sticking out of his back pocket.

Mother came over to the window and held her gun up against her chest. "Don't take your eyes off them," she said. We watched Daddy walk over to the boys and say something to them. One of them answered back; he sounded angry.

Daddy took a few steps backward and pointed toward our driveway.

"They're refusing to leave," Mother said.

One of the boys spoke, and the biggest boy moved away from the group and went over to our car. He leaned against it for a minute while the other two argued. Then one of the boys yelled something to him, and he started moving toward my father.

"I'm going to shoot," I heard Mother say. "He's going after your father."

"No, Mother," I said, moving my rifle up toward my face. "Wait and see."

The boy kept moving toward my father, walked around in back of him and stopped. I pressed the stock of the gun against my face

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and quickly sighted the boy in.

"Wait," I said to Mother. "Let him make the first move."

The boy slowly raised his left hand.

"If he takes one step," I heard Mother whisper, "one more step and I'll . . ."

The boy stood there and Daddy slowly turned toward him. The boy looked at my father for a long time before he bent down, picked up a rock and sent it flying into the air high over the trees. Then he called to the other two boys, and the three of them moved away from the tree and started toward the driveway. It wasn't until they were at the gate that I lowered my gun.

I turned and looked at Mother. She lowered her eyes. Suddenly there were a million things we'd never be able to say to one another.

I left the room and walked out the front door and down to the river. I saw two cans in the garbage dump across the river. I sighted them in and fired. Three bullets went into the first can, three into the second. I looked for a third can and saw it above the dump on the bluff. It was bigger than the others and shining in the sunlight. Bigger than the others and shining in the sunlight, and I had almost shot three people without even knowing who they were. That was the way things were in war—shooting people without even knowing who they were, and why hadn't I gone out and been friendly to the boys and tried to get to know them? With whom were we at war, my parents and I? Had we declared war on all strangers?

I couldn't answer that question and, because I couldn't, I fired the four remaining bullets into the last can.

Suddenly, to my left, I heard more shots. *The boys,* I thought. *They've come back.* I turned and saw Daddy standing down the river from me, shooting, not at the boys, not at anything, just emptying his gun into the bluff across the river. Then I heard more shots from up near the house. I turned and saw Mother sitting on the front steps, firing aimlessly into the dirt at her feet.

She would have killed them, I thought, as the last of her six shots went off. *She, who had never shot a gun in her life, would have killed those boys.*

I dropped to my knees and let the gun fall into the dirt beside me. I would have killed them too. If that boy had taken one more step, I would have emptied my rifle into all three of them. Then I rolled over on my back and stared up into the hot Texas sun.

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When man is tempted to bemoan his multitudinous domestic obligations, he should consider for solace the final word in the incommodious.



the ULTIMATE INCONVENIENCE

by David Weir

Wes Harmon sipped his third double martini, then turned to his wife who was wedged into a minute opening at the bar next to him. "Yes, dear. We'll get the insurance after this drink," he replied to her third query in ten minutes. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the high-pitched protests of busy drinkers who were being neglected by an even busier bartender.

THE Skyroom Bar, one of twenty watering spots at Chicago's International Airport, was crowded with passengers, and the cigarette smoke they expelled hung stationary seven feet above the floor like a low cloud deck. The room's atmosphere was hot, stuffy, and punctuated with an unseen excitement of eagerly awaited journeys. An anonymous voice spewed forth a constant stream of flight arrival and departure times that emptied tables and bar stools, which were quickly filled again by other travelers.

His wife started to speak over the surrounding din, realized the futility of the effort and just nodded in reply. Gloria Harmon was fifty-five, a plumpish five-foot-two, and had the unfortunate knack of appearing disarranged immediately after a hair appointment and of looking shabby even in original clothes. Her husband, on the other hand, was blessed with impeccable taste, and his tall, lean frame

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was adorned in the latest and expensive fashion. He looked like a distinguished, well-to-do banker that, as assistant cashier of National Fidelity, he almost was. He was also winning the eternal battle against the aging process, temporarily at least, for he looked ten years younger than the fifty-six years he carried.

Wes drained his martini and was trying to flag down the bartender for another, when his wife tugged his sleeve. "We'd better go, Wes. My plane leaves in forty minutes."

The Harmons threaded their way through the crowded lobby, Wes guiding his wife through a covey of sailors on leave, then struggled to the busy insurance counter and waited until the one girl on duty could issue the application forms.

"The usual?" Wes asked his wife, his voice tinged with indifference.

"Of course, dear," she replied, and as the girl handed her the forms Gloria began the ritual that occurred each time she flew. It wasn't that she distrusted the airline's competency. Gloria simply felt she should hedge her bet, so to speak, so for the past fifteen years when she and Wes had traveled, she insisted on each of them taking out a $100,000 policy naming the other as beneficiary. Gloria also insisted they travel on separate planes. Her brother and sister-in-law now rested permanently in the Everglades, courtesy of one airline, and a friend of a friend of Gloria's left three orphans after plummeting from the skies over New York City. Gloria felt it just made common sense to take separate planes. The President and Vice President don't fly on the same plane; corporations won't let their top executives fly on the same plane; and smart families shouldn't have husband and wife on the same plane.

The Harmons spent the next ten minutes filling out forms, addressing envelopes and making a trip to the mailbox. When the impersonal, electronic voice filtered through the lobby announcing the impending departure of Gloria's flight, she gathered her husband and led him down the long, narrow concourse. "Now just remember," Gloria said reassuringly, "your flight leaves one hour after mine. With my stops in Omaha and Denver, we'll arrive in Los Angeles at the same time. If we miss each other on arrival, we'll meet in the bar. OK?"

Wes patiently acknowledged her instructions. It was the fourth time he had heard them. He escorted Gloria through the enclosed

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boarding ramp and led her to a seat in the first class cabin. She quickly kissed him on the cheek, then glanced at her watch. "I'll see you in L. A. in four and a half hours."

Wes murmured stilted farewells, left the airplane and headed toward the bar to await the call of his flight. Cautiously sipping his fourth double martini, Wes fingered the half of a sleeping tablet in his jacket pocket. He hated to fly. So, through years of experimentation, he subdued his fears with four double martinis, no more and no less, topped off with half of a sleeping tablet. The combination enabled Wes to board the plane pleasantly intoxicated, but not overtly drunk, slip into his seat and fall sound asleep before the plane left the boarding ramp, then sleep undisturbed until arriving at his destination.

Thirty minutes before his flight was scheduled to depart, Wes boarded the plane, tossed his briefcase on the rack above the seat and settled down for the journey. He told the stewardess not to disturb him until they arrived, then succumbed to the gin and the pill, drifting into a deep slumber that bordered on the unconscious.

One hour after departure and while cruising at 31,000 feet, a light, steady chop of clear air turbulence gently shook Wes and lifted him from a black abyss to deposit him on a plateau of drowsiness where the unconscious and conscious intermingle. Wes was attempting to return to the secure realm of alcohol and sedatives when a moderate updraft banged into the plane, rattling Wes' teeth and rudely projecting him back to reality. He instinctively grabbed the seat arms and quickly tried to focus his sleep-fogged and burning eyes. As the plane bounced through the turbulent air as if it were traveling an ancient, rutted road, Wes' face turned gray with tinges of fear and he felt stabs of pain throughout his body.

The stewardess noticed Wes was awake and haltingly made her way toward him, stopping occasionally to ride out a jolt. "Your wife was aboard just before we left the terminal," she said, handing him a note. "She wanted me to give you this when you woke up."

Wes' white-knuckled hand grasped the note, and as he opened the folded paper the full impact of the situation flashed in drugged and clouded mind. What was she doing here?

His body began to tremble as he read. He read it again, once more, then started to whimper

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like a whipped dog. The postscript leaped from the page and burned itself into his terror-stricken brain, and a low, guttural and desperate moan escaped his lips. Jamming the note into his pocket, Wes struggled from his seat and lurched toward the cockpit. He never made it.

The explosive fireball blasted from the lower aft baggage compartment and instantly severed the left wing from the fuselage. Sparked by the bomb, a secondary explosion roared through the rear engines, ripping away the tail section. The mortally wounded jetliner heaved upward, then flipped on its back and began a slow, grotesque, downward spiral, like a leaf from a towering oak. The blast concussion and the abrupt, unnatural flight maneuver of the aircraft tossed Wes onto the cabin ceiling. As the plane dipped into a steep, terminal dive, he skidded along the ceiling and slammed into the bulkhead separating the passenger cabin from the cockpit. More debris and seats, occupied and unoccupied, slammed toward the nose of the airplane, trapping him.

Wes had only sixty seconds to live and, contrary to accepted opinion, his life did not flash by in a kaleidoscope of memories. Instead, his mind focused first on a short, bespectacled bank examiner, who in three weeks would discover an $80,000 shortage in Wes' accounts, then shifted to Gloria—the dour, unattractive and sexless woman he had grown to hate—who now had deprived him of the desperately needed $100,000 insurance and the chance of a new, exciting life.

Wes Harmon's heart didn't survive a spasm of terror and he died 5,000 feet above the Kansas wheat field that eventually claimed him.

The FBI accident identification team found Gloria's note jammed into Wes' trouser pocket. Though splattered with blood and pierced in several places by bone fragments, it was still readable:

Wes, dear,

Saw you were asleep and didn't want to disturb you. My flight had engine trouble just before takeoff and was cancelled. Will take later plane so don't bother to wait. I'll meet you at the hotel.

Love,

G.

P. S. Some cargo was transferred from my flight to yours, and the agent was kind enough to transfer my luggage so I wouldn't have to bother with it on arrival. Watch after it, dear, and I hope it won't inconvenience you too much.

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The public often is the theatre critic who writes his denunciatory review before the final curtain falls.



THERE were six of us that weekend in early May at the McAllister summer place on Stevens Lake, and at four o'clock Sunday morning the city police found the body of the man who died up there on the back seat of his car, in front of a funeral home. In our panic we did a stupid thing, but in the course of future events, it would have been worse for us if we had done the right thing.

My name is Susan Clarke and I'm a nurse. I was just back in town after many years in New York, and I was sitting in the Wellington Bar when Tony McAllister came in. He rushed across to my table and gave me a big kiss.

"Susan, darling! It's been years. How many? Ten?"

"More than that."

"You look marvelous, baby. Little tired, maybe."

"I'm just off a private case, Tony —a very hard one."

He was the same Tony, average height, slim, a dapper ladies' man, faintly effeminate but not obnoxiously so. He ordered another daiquiri for me and a whiskey sour for himself. We sat at the table for

by Vera Flack

an hour talking about Stevens Lake, where our families had spent the summers when we were in our teens. When I said I had lost all track of the old gang, it gave Tony an idea.

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"Then let's get 'em together and have a reunion this weekend out at grandpa's house on the lake. I haven't been up there for years."

"You mean *this* weekend? This is Thursday."

"So what? I've kept in touch with them, more or less, and I think they're all in town. Hey, waiter, bring me a phone and a book."

I made a feeble effort to dissuade him. "They probably have other plans, and it will be cold up there this early."

"There's a gas furnace and the huge fireplace. It's completely furnished. All we need to take is food and plenty to drink. Oh, here we are—Hubbard; that's Lucille's name now. She just divorced her second husband last week." When he got her on the line, he told her of my return and the planned reunion. "Can you make it? Here, talk to Sue. She's as good-looking as ever."

Lucille's cultured eastern college voice sounded bored; she was quite willing to go. Tony said he would call her back.

"Next we'll try Lester. He's writing a book about his war years. Never married—Howard says Les is betrothed to a bottle of Scotch." Les said he had struck a snag in his book and would like to see the old crowd.

That left our married couple, Cindy and Howard. It took four calls to locate Cindy at a cocktail party. She screamed in delight that it would be just too marvelous. "Howard is just in from a business trip. What shall I bring?"

"Not a thing, darling. This party is on me. I'll call you later."

We had dinner in the coffee shop and made food lists. Tony took me back to the nurses' dormitory where I was staying and at ten Friday morning I saw his car and ran out to meet him. Loaded with all kinds of goodies, we headed for the lake, nibbling sandwiches on the way.

On the two-hour trip I got very tired of Tony. I had forgotten what a marathon talker he is. He boasted about his connection with the theatre, dropped a lot of well-known names and talked of going to Hollywood to direct. I didn't believe a word he said.

The old McAllister house and about twenty others are at the west end of the lake on the bluffs. We didn't go through Stevens Village, but took the back road. It was lovely up there, the trees beginning to turn green and a few spring beauties in the grass. I felt a tug at my heart, remembering all our good times there. The house was a huge old-fashioned wooden horror which once had sported two tow-

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ers, gone now. The livingroom was furnished as it always had been, wicker furniture, Navajo rugs. Big windows looked out to the lake and there was the enormous flagstone fireplace.

Tony opened only one wing and while he went to start the furnace and the refrigerator, I took dust covers from the furniture and got bedding from the cedar closet and flung it on the six beds. We stored all the food away and set up a bar on the sideboard in the dining room.

"There's a jeep out back that I leave here for the elderly cousins who use the house in the summer. I'll go and unlock the gas pump and fill it up. We might want to ride around in the woods. I'll get the fireplace going too."

I checked dishes and utensils, dusted a little, then walked down past the tightly shuttered houses to the bluff and looked across the water to Stevens Village, ten miles away. Nothing stirred anywhere. I enjoyed the peace after Tony's eternal chatter. When I heard a car coming around the last curve, I hurried back to the house, bursting with curiosity.

Before the car—Lester's—stopped, Cindy yelled in her high uncomfortable voice, "Ist dis der blace ver der barty ist, I hope?" She gave me a casual, "Hi, Susan," and leaped into Tony's arms. She had not changed at all; petite figure, magnolia skin and blonde curls—real, no bottle. I was always jealous of her. I am a head taller, dark, and a little on the bony side.

When Lucille climbed out, I repressed a gasp. She was fat. Her well-chosen, fashionable clothes could not conceal it. She presented a lacquered cheek for my kiss. Howard and Lester gave me bear hugs. Howard was just the same—tall, athletic, medium coloring, best dancer in the world. Now he was a typical "big businessman."

Les had let himself go. He was a very large man and had been fine-looking. Now he was soft, dissipated and sloppy.

As we trooped into the livingroom there was a definite spirit of whoopee. They dumped their bags in a corner and surrounded Tony, who brought out a bottle of champagne.

Lucille and I shared a room and as we unpacked and made up the beds, I heard all about her two husbands. As we went to join the others she said, "Oh well, I'll find a decent guy someday. Papa left me a lot of money."

They were all gathered around that immense fireplace. Lester, slumped in a big chair, was saying, "I remember, Tony, when your grandfather built that monstrosity.

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He stood right over the poor rock mason. He didn't want it smooth —he wanted shelves and niches all over the front and sides. Each one had a special purpose; pipes, tobacco, matches. That trough thing held Scotch and glasses and the biggest one held books he was

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reading, with stone bookends. That rock man nearly went nuts."

"The raised hearth," Tony added, "was his idea too. We were always afraid he would forget that eight-inch step and fall, but he never did."

Cindy did a couple of ballet turns. "Come on, I want some excitement. I'm not on the shelf. I'm only twenty-eight."

Les grinned at her. "You're thirty-two, sweetheart."

"I am not. Howard, run get the box of records. I brought a portable, Tony, if this machine won't work. Well, Howard?"

"Oh lord," he grumbled, "do we *have* to dance? I'm tired," but he got the records.

Cindy began pushing the furniture back and ordered us to roll up the rugs. She got us to dancing and it was like the old days. Finally the Life of the Party noticed that Howard and I were having much too good a time, so she sang out that it was time to eat.

We feasted on a smoked turkey, broccoli, hot garlic bread, cheeses, glace fruits and coffee, and there was more champagne. Tony had really splurged. We lighted candles and were very festive indeed.

After dinner Lucille was determined to play bridge and picked me for her patsy, but Les and I beat Howard and her.

"You don't play by the rules. You even led from a king. You did everything wrong," she fussed.

When I replied that good bridge was played not by the rules, but by the seat of the pants, it brought a laugh at her expense. The whole evening began to go sour. Cindy asked her why she couldn't keep her men and Lucille retorted by asking, "Did you leave Howard last year or did he leave you?"

Then Lester muttered, "Better watch Lucille, Tony, she's on the prowl for number three."

Cindy giggled. "Why don't you make a play for Les, Lucille? He's an author and you could give literary teas. How goes the book, Les?"

"Well," he drawled, "dear friends and gentle people—last night I burned it."

"Oh well," Cindy snickered, "you can still drink Scotch for a solace."

"My wife," Howard snapped, "is not known for her diplomacy. Excuse her, Les. She's drunk."

Tony began passing out nightcaps which we certainly did not need, when Cindy turned to me.

"Sue, can't you find a man who will marry you? I'll bet you have never even—"

"That's all," Howard roared. "You come to bed."

The four of them drifted off, a

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little unsteadily. Tony and I sat for a while by the embers in the fireplace.

"That little hellion has been snooting you," he said. "I'd fix her if I were you. Take Howard away from her. She took him away from you years ago."

I really did not intend to do this, but Saturday morning when we were drinking coffee in the kitchen she didn't speak to me, so when Tony and Les went off in the jeep and the girls decided to do each other's hair, I told Howard I was going for a walk and he tagged along.

Sitting on a log by the shore he told me about his business and how well he was doing. Then he told me Cindy made him sick and he had been a fool to let me go. It was all very good for my ego, but I had gotten over Howard long ago.

When we came in for pre-lunch cocktails, Cindy had started a furious flirtation with Tony. He kept winking at me and paying great attention to Lucille.

After lunch the edginess and tension seemed to increase. There was talk of tramping around, but Cindy and Lucille did not have the proper shoes. Anyway it had turned cloudy and much colder. Cindy played records but nobody danced. Lucille got up another bridge game, minus Lester and me. He and I watched the storm coming up.

"Do you think we ought to go back?" he asked. "It will surely rain, and things are getting thick around here. What kind of excitement does our vexatious blonde crave? An opium den?"

We tried all sorts of things to perk up the party—charades, using bawdy words, an old ouija board. This came to an abrupt end when Les asked Tony what the attraction was for him down on Delancy Street. Tony's face turned red and then white with anger and he said it was time to get dinner.

Dinner was not jolly. Tony was really drunk and all of us were high. I had poured a couple of my drinks down the sink.

After dinner we played "Murder" with a detective who is given clues to solve a crime. This bored everybody. At eleven o'clock I was sitting by the window taking long slow breaths trying to keep from getting sick. Cindy and Lucille had started a lackadaisical game of gin when Cindy threw down the cards. "This is *some* party. I wish I had stayed at home."

"Hush," Lucille said. "Tony will hear you."

"Oh, I heard," Tony called out. He and Howard had been deep in conversation in a far corner. Now

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they walked over to the card table.

Howard said, "You must excuse my wife's guttersnipe manners. Like her mother, she is a feather-brained nitwit."

Cindy screamed something, and Lucille quietly said, "That is just what she was, Cindy."

"And how about your mother? I've heard about the capers she cut. You were born too soon."

I leaped from my chair and my anger made me sober. I ran over to the card table and pounded on it with both fists. "Shut up," I screamed, "both of you."

Les had been stretched out on the chaise and I thought he had passed out. Now he sat up groggily. "Here, here," he said, "what goes, girls?"

Nobody could stop me. I boiled over. "You self-centered pigs, all you talk about is yourselves. Not one of you is interested in me. Not one of you wants to know how things have been with me. Now I'll tell you. Last Thursday I brought my patient back here for burial—*and*—she left me nearly a million dollars." Then I flung myself into a chair and burst into tears. Everyone was embarrassed and there were murmurs of apology. Lucille came over to put her hand on my shoulder and say she was glad for me.

Tony said, "Sure. Me, too. Will you excuse Howard and me? We have an errand to do."

There were several moments of silence. No one looked at anyone else. You can't throw a tantrum and expect everything to go on as before.

Then Howard came in the front door by himself. He walked aimlessly around, poured a drink but did not drink it, got a cup of coffee and spilled it.

"Where's Tony?" Les asked and stretched himself on the chaise again.

Howard began to stutter, something he never did. "Well, uh, that is, he decided to take a little r-ride in the j-jeep."

Cindy jumped up. "The jeep! He can't drive in his condition. Why didn't you stop him, Howard?"

Then we heard the sound of the car coming down the drive and going around the front of the house and in only a few seconds the crash came. We found ourselves at the big window—all but Howard—and as the lightning flashed we could see a heap of twisted metal against a tree on the edge of the bluff. As we looked the rain began.

Howard said, "You st-stay here. I'll g-go."

Cindy screamed, "It may burn. Tony may burn. Get him out."

There was something I had to do—oh, yes—phone. I stumbled to a

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corner of the room and with shaking hand, lifted the receiver, but there was no dial tone. Lucille kept calling to me, "Get a doctor, Sue. Can't you get a doctor?" I shook my head and heard Howard's voice at the door. "Don't need a doctor. He's d-dead. D-don't go out there. It's terrible. St-stay here, Les. I'll g-go back."

I kept hearing something strange in his faltering speech. The only person who spoke was Cindy. She said inanely, "He'll get all wet. Somebody cover Tony. He'll catch cold." Then she crumpled to the floor.

Les picked Cindy up and put her in a chair, and I told her to put her head between her knees. We three were bending over her when the front door opened and closed again. Someone spoke, and I felt the hair crawl on the nape of my neck. We whirled around and Cindy's head came up.

There stood Howard—and Tony.

"Hi," Tony said and walked jauntily across to the fireplace. He laughed, a little nervously, "Well, don't stare. It was a joke."

Howard said, "I didn't want to help him, but he s-said it would be fun. Cindy wanted excitement and s-so we would give her some."

"I just started the old jeep and let her roll. I thought it would go over into the lake, but it hit a tree. Well, say something. Aren't you glad I'm alive? Well, I guess it wasn't a very good joke."

Lucille took a step toward him and she was shaking. "How dare you frighten us like that? It—it's obscene."

Tony stood below the hearth and Lester charged across the room toward him, his face livid with anger. He did not say a word, but his right arm drew back and Tony attempted to avoid the blow. He stepped back, tripped over that raised hearth and fell backward. There was a horrible crunching sound as his head struck the sharp corner of one of the shelves. For a ghastly second he hung there, his arms outstretched, and then he fell to the hearth on his left side.

Cindy began to scream, one dreadful sound after another. I strode over and slapped her face, hard. "Don't stand there staring, Howard. Take her into the kitchen and make a lot of coffee." When I stooped over Tony, I knew he had died instantly. The first cervical vertebra was broken. "Les," I called, "get some rags and a blanket from the cook's closet back of the kitchen and help me pull him farther from the fire. Tell Howard and Cindy he—he's dead."

Les didn't move. He was crouched in a chair, hands over

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his face. "I can't, Sue. I can't walk. I killed him. Tell me what to do, Sue. I killed him"

Help came from someone I never would have expected to be cool in an emergency. It was Lucille who brought what I needed and helped me to move the body away from the fire. All those awful hours she stood by. Lucille had guts.

Between us, we got Les into the kitchen. Howard had heated the dinner coffee and a fresh pot was beginning to drip. Lester was still blubbering about being a murderer.

"Les," I said, "shut up. You never hit Tony at all. There's a mark on his left cheek bone, caused by hitting the hearth. Are you listening to me, Les? This was an accident. Never mind who's to blame. All of us, plus liquor, are guilty. Now we must decide what to do."

Howard said, "We'll have to go down to the village, call the police and tell the whole story. Then we'll be hounded by the law and reporters and photographers. I can't do that, Sue. I'll lose my chance at a vice-presidency."

"There's a second way," I said. "We can be sure we have left nothing to identify us, drive to the city, call the police from a public booth and report a dead man at Stevens Lake—quietly and anonymously."

Questions arose. What booth could we use? Railway station. Didn't the police ask for your name? Give a false one. Was it possible that Tony had told someone about whom he had invited? There we must take a chance. So, to save our names from being dragged through ugly newspaper publicity, we made our decision. Lucille poured everyone a last cup of coffee.

The wind whistled around the old house, a shutter banged and there was a roll of thunder, but it was not loud enough to cover another sound. A car had driven up to the rear of the house and in a moment there was a knock on the kitchen door. Howard, being nearest, opened it.

A red-haired country boy stood there. He snatched off his cap and stammered, "Oh—I thought—I guess you must be Mr. McAllister."

Without an instant's hesitation, Lucille said, "We are friends of his. Mr. McAllister had to go back to the city at noon today. We are just getting ready to leave. Do you think the rain is about over?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do. Someone thought they seen a light up here. I'm the handyman for these cottages and I thought maybe there was a tramp. I know Mr. McAllister's cousins, but I never seen

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him. Well, I'll get on back now."

Lucille cooed, "It was *very* good of you to drive up, thank you *so* much. Good night."

We sat like stone statues as the car rattled down the hill. Finally Les said, "Well, that tears it."

I ground out my cigarette with great deliberation in a soup plate piled high with stubs. "No," I said, "it does not. There's yet a third way. We can take him with us."

There was a deep long-drawn breath around the table.

"I know where we might leave the car," Cindy said. "There's a funeral home on the edge of town. I went there once when our cook's father died. It's easy to find. Don't you see?" The tears began to roll down her cheeks. "Then there would be somebody who would soon take care of Tony. I won't ride in the car—I won't even walk by the fireplace—but please, please take him to that place."

It was almost two o'clock when we were ready to leave. Cindy did the kitchen while the rest of us, walking back and forth past that blanket-covered figure as if it might have been a medical student's cadaver, tidied the other rooms. We left the house as we had found it, except for the blood on the hearth. Howard was to go ahead in Lester's car with the two girls. Lester and I and our passenger would follow in Tony's car.

We had one last shock. As the men were carrying the body out the front door, there came a cracking, tearing noise down by the bluff. The jeep broke loose, swung around in the rain-soaked sod and plunged into the lake, into forty feet of water. We had forgotten all about that jeep.

The two-hour drive to the city was without incident. At the edge of town we pulled up a little closer to the lead car. It slowed as it passed the ornate pillared mortuary, then sped away. Lester drove around the block, saw no one and parked the car. We slid out and started walking toward town. I held on to Lester's arm because I was shaking uncontrollably. Presently Howard pulled up at the curb and we got in.

They left me at Lucille's apartment for we had decided to sweat it out together. No one spoke in the car and we didn't even say good night. Sleeping pills gave us eight hours of oblivion.

It was on the one o'clock radio broadcast. "The body of Tony McAllister, 35, great-grandson of the financier and philanthropist, was found at 6 o'clock this morning in the back seat of his car parked in front of Merman's Funeral Home, 8750 Lowden Street. Police said he was mur-

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dered by a blow at the base of the skull which broke the first cervical vertebra. Mr. McAllister lived alone in the family home at 7 Logan Place."

Murder!

Late that Sunday afternoon Lucille and I collected the remainder of my luggage from the dormitory and the railway station. On the six o'clock news there was little more about Tony. There was something about a fire at Stevens Village, and we were sure our boy had been fighting the fire.

Monday morning papers under the headline, "McAllister Murder," gave only a few details. The weapon had not been found. The car had been wiped clean of fingerprints. There was a picture of Tony, and one of the big house on Logan Place.

It was Lucille who saw the item on a back page and came rushing into my bedroom. "Look, Susan, there was a mistake on the broadcast last night. The fire was not at the village. It was on the bluff. Tony's house burned to the ground."

On Tuesday the papers were full of speculation about that fire. Our redhead had told his story about Tony's friends. The police must have tried very hard to ascertain the identity of these people. One theory was that the friends had left a cigarette on a mattress and that it had smoldered for hours. Some blamed faulty wiring. There were hints that all was not well with the McAllister fortune.

On Wednesday the boy's picture appeared, taken as he told his story. He looked as if he were enjoying the attention.

On Wednesday Tony's life began to be laid bare. His connection with Delancy Street came to light. He was known there as Joe Denton and he had played this character with great success. He was a gambler, friend of two-bit actors and men of the underworld. He rented a room next to the burlesque theatre. Knowing Tony, we were sure his double life had given him great satisfaction.

This was a bonanza for the police. There was no better place to look for a murder than Delancy Street, but the citizens there are not very chatty, so they got nowhere. Finally they let it be known that tiny bits of rock had been found in the wound. The elderly cousins were interviewed. They said there must be some mistake; Tony was always a good boy. On this day also, two pictures appeared, one of the cottage as it was when first built and another of the pile of rubble surmounted by a piece of chimney.

Once or twice we talked to Les

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and Cindy on the phone, but there was great restraint and the conversations were short.

Lucille and I lived from newspaper to newspaper and from broadcast to broadcast. We often spent time defending our actions. We found ways to justify ourselves and rationalize everything. We hadn't protected a murderer—it was an *accident.*

Sometimes we talked about what *could* have happened. If I had waited till Monday, after Tony's picture had appeared in the paper, to check out at the dormitory, would some nurse have said, "Oh, isn't that the man who picked you up here Friday?" Suppose the redhead had told the police, "One of the ladies said Mr. McAllister went back to the city." Suppose Lester had really hit Tony. The angle of his fall would have been changed.

There could have been a wreck on the way to town. We could have been stopped for some reason by a policeman who would surely have recognized a body under that blanket. There might have been a night attendant inside the mortuary who would have rushed out to greet us. Suppose the boy had never come up on the bluff and we had driven off, expecting to telephone. Tony would have burned in the fire and we would have been forced to tell the truth, no matter what the consequences.

The stories on the McAllister "murder" were fewer and finally stopped, but this did not mean that the investigations had ceased.

Three weeks after the accident, Howard, his vice-presidency achieved, had wangled a position in the New York office. Lester was on the high seas headed for Italy. His affluent uncle had agree to pay his expenses for two years so Lester could write. We had postal cards from them.

Lucille and I would like to take a world tour but we keep putting it off. Suppose the police arrest someone for Tony's murder? We would have to appear in court to tell the truth about the accident.

We wonder if anyone would believe us.



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The effect may differ for those of another breed, but that look is universal.



That LOOK in his EYE

I STOOD in the clearing and took in deep breaths of the morning air, all untainted by carbon monoxide or smog.

When I returned to the shanty, I found the radio on and old Grady sitting on the bunk in his underwear.

". . . a police car arrived during the robbery," the newscaster said, "and one of the bandits was killed in a furious gun battle."

Tough, I thought. It's always tough to get jumped during a job.

". . . one police officer died of his wounds early this morning. He was Clyde Dylmer, a veteran of six years on the force. Dylmer leaves a wife and two small children."

Not a word about the other poor guy. Maybe he had a wife and kids too.

". . . the second bandit escaped with twelve thousand dollars. The man is believed to be wounded,

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and was reported to be headed north in a late model car."

I snapped off the radio. "You want some tomato juice?" I asked and walked to the cupboard. I plugged a can, and for the first time I saw Grady's eyes. What the old man saw wasn't in the shanty.

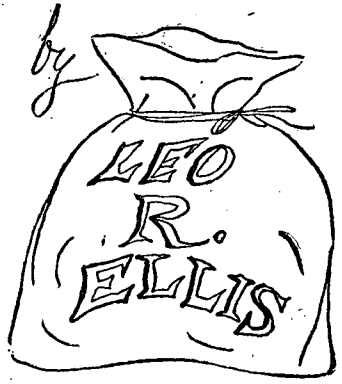
"Twelve thousand dollars," he whispered. "Hot damn, what a man couldn't do with twelve thousand dollars."

"One guy got killed for it." I handed over the juice.

"But the other feller, Rance. The other feller's still got the money. Cripes, it could be worth it."

"Tell that to the dead guy. Where did this happen?"

Grady cradled the can in trembling hands. "At Arvine, eighty miles south of here." He tilted the can, gulped and wiped the dribble from the gray stubble on his chin.



"The other feller headed north—what time did we leave Hagerville last night, Rance?"

"At midnight, when the bar closed. I dragged you out and drove home."

Grady set the can on the floor and nodded. "The feller could have made it here by then." He closed his eyes. "That light I seen when we passed the old Foley place . . ."

I slammed the coffeepot down on the kerosene stove. I knew what Grady meant; I had seen the flashlight bobbing around the burned out farmhouse, two miles back down the road. I had thought Grady was too drunk to see anything. "I'll make the coffee strong," I said.

Grady scooped his pants off the floor and pulled them on. He struggled into his shirt and shoes and clapped the old hat down on his bald head. "I'll see iffen I can scare us up a job."

I watched him leave, and heard the pickup truck start and rattle off down the road. Grady didn't want a job. A man doesn't search for a slow buck when he has that look in his eye. I recognized the look, and knew it meant nothing but bad news for the guy who had it.

I washed the dishes and swept out the shanty. This was home

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and I liked it neat. This past year in the Louisiana backwoods had done wonders for me. I had my health back, and something to boot —peace of mind. Now I didn't jump when somebody knocked on the door. I didn't dodge when I saw a lawman.

It was a great feeling, but this look in Grady's eye had me worried. Grady wasn't smart, but he had been good to me. He hadn't asked questions when I drifted in. I'd pulled more than my share when we cleared stumps, hauled, or dug cellars for a day's wages. I didn't mind the work because I liked it here.

When Grady returned at noon, his breath told me he had been to town. He had a bottle bulge in his pocket, and the look was still in his eye, hotter than ever. I put two bowels of warmed-up stew on the table. "Eat your lunch," I said.

"Rance," Grady said, sort of breathless, "I stopped by the old Foley place."

"That wasn't smart."

"I was keerful. There was two sets of tire tracks, so I knew the feller had been there and had left again." Grady took a deep breath. "Rance, I found fresh footprints around the dug well."

"Your stew's getting cold."

He grabbed my arm. "It's there, Rance. The money's in that dug well. It all figures. Two strangers was seen hanging around there a few days ago. It was them bandit fellers for sure. They meant to use the burned out house fer a hide-out." Grady was panting now. "Twelve thousand dollars in that well, hot damn."

"You'll get yourself killed," I growled.

"No, they said the feller was shot. I figure he stashed the money, then went to find a doctor he could trust. Rance, if we was to—"

"Forget it." I got up, stomped over and put a kettle of water on the stove.

Grady brought out the bottle and took a long pull. I ignored him and took down my shaving gear.

"Rance," he finally said in a wheedling tone, "I'm an old man. I've never had nothing, but with six thousand dollars I could go off somewhere and live out my days real easy."

I rattled the shaving brush in the mug and grunted.

"Twelve thousand dollars. Twelve thousand is well nigh a fortune, Rance."

I stared at my reflection in the mirror and thought what that money would cost me. This was an easy life, a good life. A man would be a fool to let it go down the drain without a struggle. I

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stared into the mirror for a full minute. "You don't know what you're talking about," I shouted. "That kind of money is no good, believe me. I know."

"I got a right to find out. I ain't never asked nothing of you before, Rance."

Grady was right; he had never asked a thing. The old man had given me a year of happiness; maybe that was all a guy could expect. "All right," I said in a flat voice, "if that's what you want." I threw the brush against the wall. "But for your sake, Grady, I hope the money isn't there."

I got a rope and drove to the Foley place without speaking. We found only two sets of tracks; no one had returned.

Grady was so excited his hands shook when he tied the rope around his waist. I saw the look in his eyes and turned away. "Watch yourself," I said and lowered him over the curb.

A few moments later Grady whooped. "I've found it," he yelled up. "The money's in a weighted, plastic bag. The feller tied an empty bottle on it fer a float, so he could fish it out."

"Hang on," I called down. "I'll pull you out." I hauled on the rope until Grady's head appeared over the curb. I reached in and took the plastic bag. I dropped it to the ground, and in the same motion I whipped out my hunting knife and slashed the rope in two.

A long yell came from the well, followed by a splash.

Clutching the bag to my chest, I headed for the truck.

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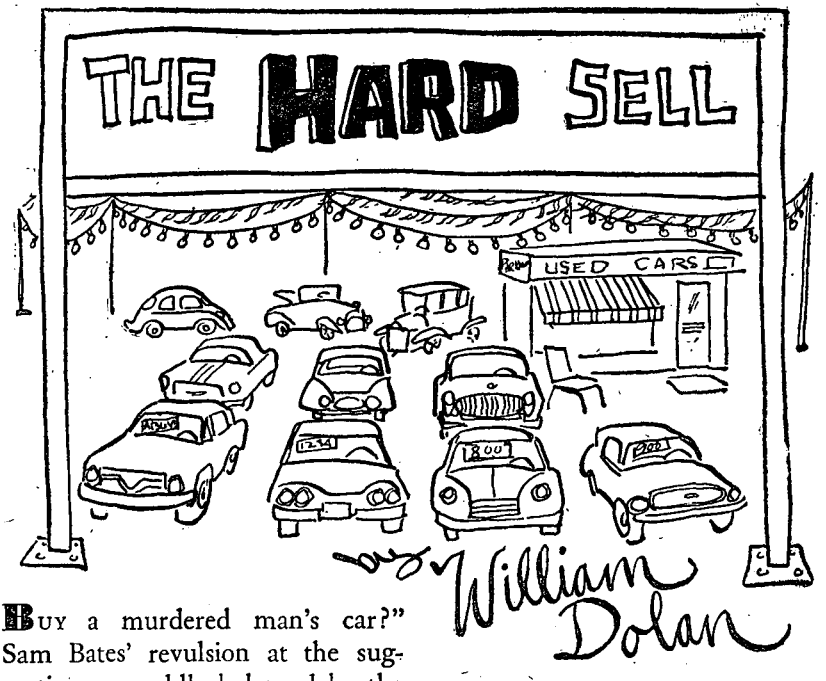
I want to thank all of you for your interest.

Most sincerely,

Pat Hitchcock

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Commercial persuasion varies, but there may be only one effectual method of selling oneself.



"Buy a murdered man's car?" Sam Bates' revulsion at the suggestion was oddly balanced by the magnetism the car held for him because he had known its former owner. He hesitated, polarized between the red station wagon and another parked alongside it in the used car lot. The cars were identical except that the second was blue and lacked the garish black racing stripe which ran the length of its red stablemate.

"The red wagon is yours for $300 less than I'll take for the blue baby, and it's a better car." Joe Parkman, owner and sole salesman of Hensonville's only used car lot, sensed Sam's fascination

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for the late Charlie Walsh's car. "I'll level with you, Sam," he went on, looking earnestly at his prospect as he warmed to his sales pitch, "the car's been hard to sell. Everybody in town knows it was Charlie Walsh's car and nobody'll buy it. They all come to look, but nobody wants it. They're all fools, because it's in top condition. Now I've had it too long and it's got to go."

Sam Bates circled the red car while Parkman talked, then slid his slim six-foot length behind the wheel.

"Fits you good, Sam," Parkman interposed before expertly resuming the identical spiel he had practiced for the past month on anyone showing serious interest in the car. "A couple days ago I decided to give a break to the first one of my regular old customers who came by and showed interest. If I got to take a licking I don't want it from no stranger. And here you are and there the car is. Sam, you're in luck."

Sam didn't have much money, but the price was good, no question of it. Although Sam had known Charlie Walsh, he hadn't liked him. Charlie, the flashy type, had been meticulous with his cars —clothes, cars, blondes, everything —a big ladies' man. He was a bachelor like Sam Bates, who tried to be something of a ladies' man himself but never had possessed Charlie's ability to score. Then two months ago Charlie had been found in the little Midwestern town's park slumped over the wheel of his red car, with red blood staining his new red tie. He'd been shot between the eyes by person or persons unknown. There had been a big splash in the local paper, and tired-looking detectives from out of town had tirelessly gone about Hensonville asking embarrassing questions, but after a time people seemed to lose interest, and conversation in the local saloons returned to normal subjects such as crops and women. Now here was Charlie Walsh's car for sale at Joe Parkman's used car lot.

Was a $300 reduction enough discount for the faint bloodstain still on the front seat despite Parkman's skill in the chemistry of used car preparation? Sam wondered, felt revulsion a second time, then thought sadly once again of his financial inadequacy. Sam, thirty-three years old, had a minor government job, secure enough, but short on pay even for a bachelor.

"Knock off another hundred and it's a deal," Sam said impulsively, unaware, until he spoke, of his intent to make an offer.

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Once he had spoken, he became faintly aware of other reasons for wanting the car, ones that he only partly acknowledged even to himself. They concerned his dislike for Charlie Walsh, which had been more intense than he liked to admit. Charlie's death hadn't satisfied Sam's feeling. Now Charlie's car seemed to offer a chance for Sam to continue the rivalry in which Charlie had always dominated.

The rivalry had been over women and had begun when Charlie and Sam dated several of the same girls. In a town the size of Hensonville it was almost inevitable for two long-time bachelors, both girl-conscious. Twice they had competed actively for the same girl's favor, with Charlie coming off the victor each time. The last girl had been Helen Pringle, whom Sam had thought of marrying but for whom Charlie had had no such noble intention. Helen had hurriedly left town, and Helen's father, burly Ed Pringle, was known to have visited the flat over the grocery store in which Charlie Walsh had lived. Pringle had carried his bull whip inside, but he had come out again without having used it. Charlie had been a good talker.

Sam had accosted Charlie and told him what he thought of Charlie's treatment of Helen. Charlie had listened sneeringly for a few moments before throwing the hard right hand out of nowhere that had left Sam sitting dazedly on the pavement. When Sam had risen it was only to be knocked down again. It hadn't been much of a fight.

Several months had passed after the fight before Charlie was murdered, but Sam still had been one of the prime suspects. He had the motive, the police knew, but so did Ed Pringle and several other people in the area. A heel like Charlie manages to make plenty of enemies. He was heavily in debt to the bank, and was thought to have suffered large gambling losses to a racketeer who ran dice and card games in the city fifty miles from Hensonville.

Having seen Charlie's red car all the while it sat on Joe Parkman's lot, Sam had not approached it as a prospective buyer until today. Then, when he had kicked the tires the way any used car shopper does, he had felt a sense of mastery over Charlie Walsh. Unable to beat Charlie in life, he felt that somehow he could do it in death by controlling Charlie's possession. Sam kicked the tires a second time, harder. As he made his offer to buy the car his memories churned together—the

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humiliation of losing Helen to Charlie; the fight and the added humiliation of losing; Charlie's murder and still more humiliation while he was held at police headquarters as a murder suspect. Then came the thought of how he had felt when kicking the tires. Sam quizzically awaited the used car dealer's reaction to his offer.

Joe Parkman showed only a minimum of professional hesitation before accepting. The car was an unpleasant symbol of violence that he wanted gone. Before Sam had time to change his mind the papers were signed, Sam's license plates affixed front and rear, and the red station wagon with the black stripe moved hesitantly from the used car lot, its owner already feeling that somehow he had made a serious error.

Hensonville had only two bars. Sam drove the short distance from Parkman's lot to the first of them and drew up to the curb. He needed a drink. He also needed to make his purchase known, to sound out public opinion.

Comment was not long in coming. Another car pulled up to the curb and Ben Thorpe, pudgy cashier of the town bank, emerged. Sam stepped out of his car with his back toward Ben, but when he turned around, Ben's face turned gray and his jaw slacked.

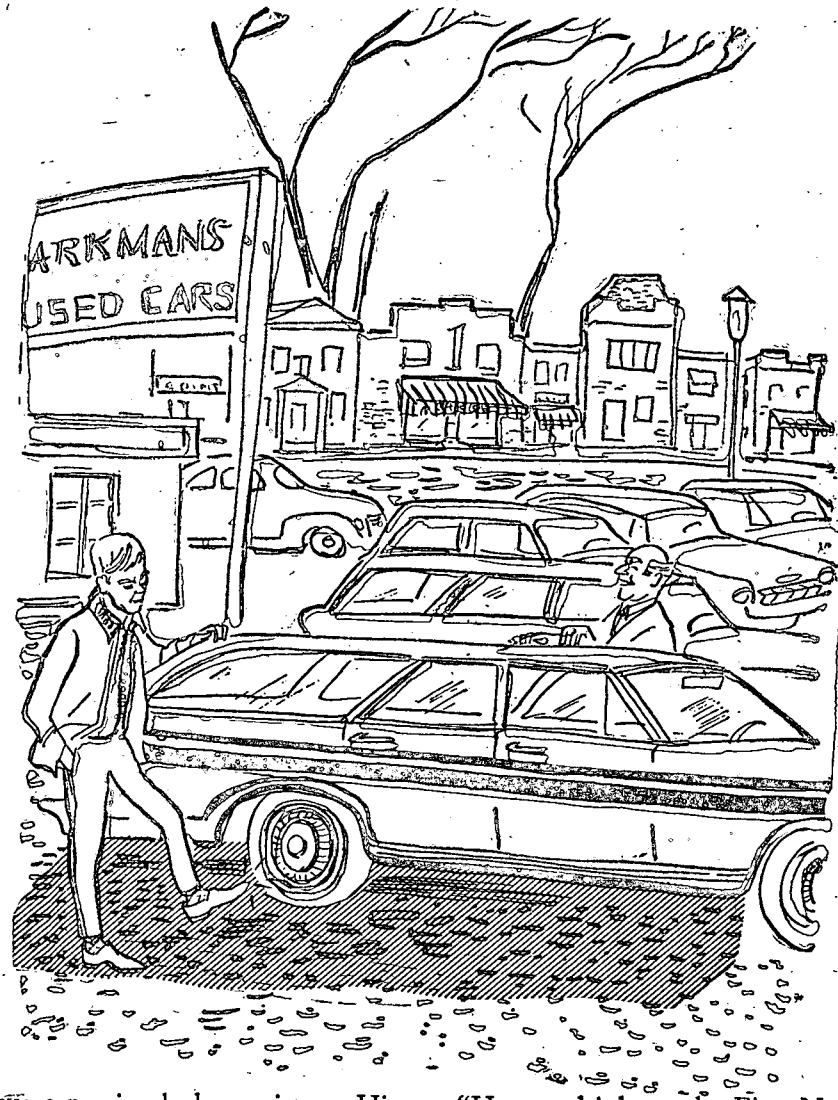
"I thought you were Charlie Walsh, back from the grave!" Ben said.

Until that moment no one had ever commented on the physical resemblance of Sam Bates to the murdered Charlie Walsh, but now Sam felt the validity of the observation. In height and build he and Charlie could have been twins. The similarity even extended to the thick brown hair that Sam never succeeded in keeping combed for long. There it ended, physically. Sam's taste ran to the same loud clothes that Charlie had favored, though. Seen from the rear, emerging from Charlie Walsh's car, Sam Bates looked like a ghost.

With a self-conscious effort Sam passed off Ben Thorpe's remark lightly. "Got a real good buy," he said. "I'm not loaded like you bankers, you know. Besides," he leered with an attempt at humor, "I thought this buggy might make me a hit with the girls the way Charlie Walsh was."

"You won't get any local dame within fifty feet of that car," replied Ben. "Charlie Walsh got the last action in that wagon that this town will see." Ben's comment was casual, but his voice was strained. It was as though Sam's appearance with Charlie Walsh's car had suddenly thrown into fo-

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cus a previously hazy picture. His identity with the murdered man was taking a turn which Sam had sensed but not foreseen.

"Have a drink on the First National," said Ben, changing the subject to relieve the tension as he and Sam entered the bar. "I'm

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here on official business for the boss and I never like to miss a chance to drink during working hours."

"I thought Mr. Grimes handled the outside work himself," said Sam, unconsciously using the formal "Mr." that everyone in Hensonville invariably applied in naming Frederick Grimes, president and practically the owner of the town's First National Bank. Hensonville was generally an informal town where everyone knew everyone else, but the town banker, its two doctors, and its four clergymen always were deferred to when named by its citizenry. Mr. Grimes was nearing fifty, tall and somewhat portly, known as "an imposing figure of a man." He was all the more imposing by virtue of being the town's only millionaire.

"Mr. Grimes has gone to visit his wife," Ben said.

Jane Grimes, some years younger than her husband, had gone East to care for her aged and ill father some four months ago, almost two months before Charlie Walsh was murdered. Mr. Grimes, who could afford it, frequently flew East to visit her, but Jane Grimes had not returned to Hensonville. She was afraid of airplanes, and the distance was too far for easy return by train or car.

Inside the bar Ben Thorpe ordered drinks for himself "and the new owner of Charlie Walsh's car." Comment on the purchase by the bartender and the two men at the bar was slight but unfavorable. The bartender, an affable man who deferred to his patrons, allowed to hearing that Joe Parkman had it priced way low.

Finding the atmosphere of the bar unfriendly, Sam soon left. As he self-consciously approached his new car he saw Tess Bowman, the postmaster's middle-aged and mouthy wife, staring tight-lipped at him across the dusty street. Sam defiantly took out his handkerchief and polished an imaginary spot off the fender before entering the car and starting it. He raced the engine loudly in neutral before driving off at a deliberately slower than normal speed.

"With Tess Bowman and the bartender at work there won't be anyone in town tomorrow who doesn't know I bought Charlie Walsh's car," Sam mused, his new feeling of defensiveness growing stronger within him. "Small-town hicks," he said to himself as he reached open country and trod hard on the gas pedal. The car ran beautifully. Not a rattle in it, not a scratch on the finish, and the interior was perfect except for

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one small brown stain on the front seat. Sam's right hand dropped to the stain and patted it.

When he entered the office the next morning, Sam felt a new distance from the eight other government workers whose hostile backs gave him a wordlessly negative greeting as he entered. By mid-morning the feeling was confirmed. There were three unmarried young women in the office, two of whom had shown signs of interest in bachelor Sam. One of the two he had dated occasionally. Today even the single girls avoided him. To be certain, he asked the girl he had dated to go out with him that Saturday. She flushed, hesitated, and stammered something about a previous date. In the afternoon Sam, who was a man of impulse, suddenly found himself asking the other two girls to go out. Both refused. The girl who had shown interest in him, but whom he had never dated, hurried from her desk to the ladies' room in tears moments after raising her somewhat plain face to his and saying simply, "I couldn't." The last of the trio, who had other amorous attachments, was more forceful. "To hell with you, Clyde," she said, and turned back to her typewriter, her faster and louder than normal clacking of the keys spelling out a message which Sam understood perfectly. Ben Thorpe had been right. The romantic qualities of Charlie Walsh's station wagon did not transfer to its new owner along with title to the car.

Shortly before quitting time Bob Hawkins, the boss, called Sam into his private office and closed the door. Hawkins was perhaps ten years older than Sam, a small man, rather officious. "Sam, you made a mistake buying that car," he began without prelude. "I know the price was right in dollars, but it still was a bad buy in this town. Everybody's talking about it," he went on somewhat lamely. "If I were you I'd get rid of it fast."

Sam had never liked Bob Hawkins. Sam's advancement in his job had been minimal, for which he blamed Hawkins. He did not take Hawkins' advice well, especially coming as it did after his rejection by the girls. "I don't like that truck you drive either, Bob," Sam said, referring to Hawkins' flashy convertible.

"Just trying to give you a friendly tip, Sam," Hawkins said in a tone of mild annoyance. "The big difference between your car and mine isn't one of make or model. Has it occurred to you that people in this town are going to start all over again to say you had some-

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thing to do with Charlie Walsh's murder?"

There it was. Sam had to face it now. Before, he had only let it peek at him around the corners of his mind. He had thought hard of something else, such as his genuine need for a new car and what a good buy it really was. Before, when he had been a murder suspect along with all the others, Sam had felt a brief excitement. It had been a nightmare, of course, the whole business with Charlie Walsh, but the limelight of recognition by the town had also been thrilling. Even when suspicion moved away from him as the police chased other false leads, there had come the brief afterglow when the citizenry, one by one, had sought him out, shaken his hand and told him they knew all along that he was innocent.

Then the flame had grown quite cold. Sam had ceased to be of interest, but now that he owned Charlie's car things were back where they had been before. In the moment of his indignant reaction to his boss' question Sam felt something akin to a glow of pleasure.

"The idiots!" he exclaimed after a long moment. "The stupid small-town idiots!"

"That's precisely it, Sam," Hawkins said. "This is a small town. It recently had its first murder that anyone can remember, and that murder is unsolved. People were just beginning to forget it and now you've got them started again. Since you're the focal point of the conversation, it occurs to them to pin the murder on you. At lunch I heard the old rumor that you killed Charlie Walsh because he was beating your time with a girl."

"When the city detectives were in town they checked me out along with everybody else," Sam said heatedly. "They even gave me a lie-detector test. I passed."

"When a lie-detector test indicates guilt, everyone believes the test," Hawkins said. "When it indicates innocence, they say that lie-detector tests are inconclusive. Just the fact that you took a lie-detector test makes you fair game."

"Well they can all go straight to the devil as far as I'm concerned," Sam said. "I'm damned if I'll knuckle under to a scuzzy bunch of hick-town gossips." He hushed the voice inside him which still whispered his additional reason, his lust for the thrill of living dangerously that identification with Charlie Walsh gave.

"Your funeral, Sam," Hawkins replied as Sam walked through his office door to the outer room where town public opinion in mi-

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crocosm awaited him, embodied in the self-consciously silent forms of his co-workers.

Years before Sam had lived in another small town where a false rumor arose about a rather odd neighbor of his that the man was a drug addict. The man, when the rumor got back to him, planted the path from the sidewalk to his front door thickly with poppies, their bright orange petals calculated to suggest opium to the scandal-mongers. Sam had enjoyed the man's triumph when the gossip stopped as the small minds were intellectually unable to cope with the wordless rebuff.

In the same spirit of defiance Sam next day entered a hardware store and asked to see some .38 caliber revolvers. Such a weapon had eliminated Charlie Walsh as his romantic competitor. The furrows deepened in the bald head of Jack Welley, the storekeeper, as he waved Sam toward his gun display. Welley's hand shook slightly when he handed Sam the gun. Sam flipped the gun open expertly, squinted knowingly into the chamber and said, "Sold."

A permit had to be obtained, and the local police thereby informed of his purchase. The paunchy desk sergeant said nothing until Sam placed his permit in his wallet and turned to leave the station, then, "How do you like your new car?" he asked.

"Fine," replied Sam. "Best car I ever owned. I expect to keep it for years."

"It used to be a real good girl-catcher," said the policeman.

Sam led the sergeant on. "I figured maybe some of Charlie Walsh's good luck would rub off on me," he said. "The gun is to make sure I don't have his bad luck too." Sam returned his wallet to his hip pocket and carefully fastened the button before leaving.

Two days later the city detectives visited Sam at the house where he roomed. Ruth Caldwell, his landlady, called him from the foot of the stairs. "Visitors, Mr. Bates," she shrilled, her aged voice cracking nervously.

Sam had roomed with Ruth Caldwell for three years and never been called anything by her but Sam. Now her formality emphasized his new status in town as leading murder suspect. The gun purchase hadn't worked for Sam the way the poppies had for his former neighbor. Nobody appreciated what Sam considered the humor of its purchase two months after the murder. "Cover-up," they said. "Running scared," somebody commented. "He's a psychopathic nut who *wants* to get caught," said another. "It won't be long

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now before they arrest him for it," said the voice of the town, echoing back to Sam from the office, the diner, the bar. Nobody else had really said anything to him, except Mr. Grimes, the bank president, in refusing to accept the time sales contract that Sam had signed to finance his car.

"Joe Parkman should have sold that car out of town," Mr. Grimes had said when Sam called at his office to learn why his credit was no good. Mr. Grimes' lips had pursed as he looked at Sam with evident distaste. "If Parkman hadn't been so greedy he'd have wholesaled it at the auto auction in the city like he was supposed to do when he got it from Charlie Walsh's estate. I won't have anything to do with it, and if you've got any brains, young fellow, you'll get rid of it fast.

"I'll help you out there, Sam." Mr. Grimes had continued in a more kindly tone. "I'll get Joe Parkman to tear up the contract and take the car back. He sees his mistake now and he'll do it, all right."

Of course Sam had rejected the banker's offer, forcing Joe Parkman to handle the financing of the car personally. Sam's view of the situation was that he was engaged in open war against bigotry and he had no intention of knuckling under. "Maybe it's because I haven't got a lot to lose," he told himself. "They can't fire me from my government job, and I don't have a family to worry about. Besides, if I give in now I'll look like a damned fool and I'll lose my self-respect as well."

So Sam went calmly down the stairs of his landlady's house and answered the policemen's questions in her sterile livingroom while she waited in the kitchen with her ear to the swinging door.

"No need for fancy electronic bugging devices in this town," said Sam loudly to the detectives as he saw the door to the kitchen move slightly. "All the people have big ears."

"Maybe we'd better finish this downtown," said one of the detectives. "Downtown" doubtless was a term that meant traveling a considerable distance in the city. In Hensonville it meant four blocks. The detectives had walked from the police station to Ruth Caldwell's. Now they accepted Sam's offer of a ride in his new red station wagon. At the police station they opened the file on their previous interrogation of Sam and proceeded to ask the same questions. They were even more thorough this time. They also repeated the lie-detector test. Three hours passed before they looked

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at each other, shrugged, and told Sam that he could go.

Despite the late hour several people were lounging about the street near the police station when Sam left. He noticed others parked in cars nearby, their curiosity thinly concealed by the closed doors of their automobiles. The wolves weren't howling for blood yet, but they had the scent. Sam followed his now-standard practice of racing his engine loudly in neutral before driving off slowly. "Idiots," he muttered bitterly to himself.

His landlady met him in the narrow front hall as he entered the house, her husky son standing behind her. He lived a few blocks away with his wife and family. His mother obviously had called him over for a special purpose.

"I'd like you to leave my house, Mr. Bates," she said without prelude.

"Tonight," added her son menacingly.

Sam opened his mouth to argue, hesitated, then changed his mind. "I'm paid up until the first of the month," he said mildly when he finally spoke. "I'll want some money back before I leave."

Ruth Caldwell sniffed in what she intended to be her most contemptuous manner, but she produced the worn black handbag that to Sam had long been her emblem of office as landlady. Now it also became to him her badge of outraged middle class respectability. She counted out the proper amount. Sam took it wordlessly and mounted the stairs to his room with the deliberate slowness of movement that had become characteristic of him.

Packing was simple. A few trips between bedroom and car and Sam's belongings were stowed. As he drove away from the house he wondered where he was going. At best, there were few places for a bachelor to stay in Hensonville. At worst—Sam's present situation—he could think of none. Private homes like his ex-landlady's would be closed to him. He wouldn't risk humiliation by trying any of them. The same thing applied to the one or two regular rooming houses in town. That left the two hotels. Sam chose the lesser of the two.

Lew Brody, night clerk at the Hensonville Inn, carefully returned the paperback book he had been reading to the revolving wire bookstand, careful not to crease the cover as he did so. Then he looked up expectantly to the man with the suitcase coming through the hotel door, but appeared disturbed when he saw that the man was Sam Bates.

"I'll take a room for a few days,

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Lew," said Sam. "Make it one with a front view, please." The rear of the old hotel butted against railroad yards which tended to be noisy as well as dirty.

Lew Brody looked over his glasses and beyond the top of Sam's head. "I'm sorry, Sam, but without a reservation we can't let you have a room." Brody spoke evenly and with a trace of formality, as though he had rehearsed his words for the occasion.

Sam had feared rejection and did not yield without argument. He had frequently shot pool with Lew Brody in the hotel's decaying billiard room, coming by evenings when both he and Brody had time to kill. Brody wasn't a friend really, but he was more than just an acquaintance.

"Cut the nonsense, Lew," Sam said. "I know as well as you do that there's dust on most of the doorknobs in this big brick monstrosity. You told me yourself the bank only keeps it open for a tax loss."

"All right, I'll give it to you straight, Sam," Brody said, straightening his thin shoulders inside his threadbare suit and looking squarely into Sam's eyes. "Mr. Grimes, who *is* the bank, had Ben Thorpe call yesterday to tell me not to rent to you."

"Yesterday!" Sam was amazed. "I didn't have trouble with my landlady until tonight! How could they know yesterday that I'd be coming here for a room?"

"Apparently your landlady thought of putting you out as soon as you bought your new car," Brody replied, "and she told half of Hensonville. Shouldn't be surprised if there's a hex on you all over town. It looks to me as if you're going to have to sleep in your car, Sam. Good thing it's a station wagon," he added dryly.

Brody was reaching for his paperback novel as Sam walked thoughtfully back to his car. "Sleep in it?" It was now nearly one o'clock and Sam had no better idea.

He drove to the town park, which was large for the size of the town, thickly wooded with several narrow winding roads radiating from the pond in the center that the townspeople dignified by calling "the lake." Like parks everywhere this one was a favorite of young lovers. Evening traffic had fallen way off, though, since Charlie Walsh had been found dead in his car on one of the side roads.

Sam saw only one other car along the road he chose, but went well past it before easing over to a wide spot on the shoulder and cutting the engine. He piled the front seat with his worldly goods

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before letting down the rear seat to form a roomy deck area, then removed part of his clothing and pulled his winter topcoat over him as a blanket. He left the two front windows partly open, tiredly wondering how long it would be before insects would force him to close them.

Sam knew nothing more until he was awakened by sunlight well after dawn. Two flies were contending for possession of the end of his nose. He scratched several fresh mosquito bites, flexed away some of the stiffness in his back, and reflected that it hadn't been too bad a night. "But the coming nights will be better," he said to himself, thinking of the purchases necessary to minimal comfort in his portable bedroom. He had no intention of giving up. It was summer. There were no restrictions against camping out in the park. Boy Scout groups often did. There was a bathhouse down by the lake. Sam went there now to shave before going to work.

On his lunch hour Sam purchased a foam mattress to fit the rear of his station wagon, a sleeping bag, and mosquito netting to cover the windows of his rear doors so they could be left open. He also bought a telescoping rod that fitted behind the front seat on which he neatly arranged his clothes on coathangers. Sam decided against a portable stove and ice chest. He would continue to eat out.

Sam had not spent his third night in the park before everyone in town knew he slept there. When he noticed he was drawing the curious to drive past his parking spot, he calmly closed the magazine he had been reading in the long light of the summer evening and drove to a movie. That night he slept at a new location in the park, and each night thereafter he moved his bedroom. Soon people stopped treating his sleeping arrangement as a zoological display, and Sam began to feel that his housing problem was solved as long as the weather held. He hoped something would happen before winter.

Something did.

Sam had been sleeping in his car nearly a month and was beginning to worry about the sharp night air of approaching fall. The hostility of the town continued exactly as it had begun. There had been no violence, no open accusations. Sam had quietly been ostracized, and a kind of armed truce existed between him and the citizens of Hensonville. The town waited for its opportunity to pounce collectively upon Sam and publicly name him murderer.

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"Wait," they said. "It won't be long now."

Sam was in the car in the park one night about ten o'clock, listening to his transistor radio. He was unhappy with his situation. The recognition he had sought and received had all turned negative. Even the police worked hard at ignoring him. He would quit his job and leave town before he'd sell the car, he decided.

The oncoming car's headlights flashed full on Sam's car. Its brakes squealed slightly as the slow-moving vehicle stopped suddenly, then backed up and parked by Sam. A slender feminine figure leaped hurriedly from the car, ran to Sam's auto, then stopped and peered about the interior before speaking breathlessly. "Oh, Charlie, darling, I was afraid you'd be here with someone else—another woman."

Sam sat rigid, speechless. The approach of the woman had surprised him. When she called him Charlie he was astonished. Everyone within a radius of fifty miles knew that Charlie was dead. Sam decided it must be a joke and true to his impulsive nature found himself going along with it. "Hi, doll," he said softly, as Charlie Walsh often had addressed women.

The slim figure pulled open the door on the passenger's side and threw herself into Sam's arms. The warm body pressed against him and Sam felt an avid mouth on his neck, his cheek, and finally coming to rest under his ear. *Some joke,* he thought as she held him tightly. When she spoke again he knew who she was.

"Charlie, I had to come back. I know what we promised, and I tried. Really, I tried! But five months was all I could take, Charlie." Her lips sought his hungrily. After a moment she mildly accused, "You've changed."

Sam thought of Charlie's reputation as a lover and by way of reply kissed her again. He had heard enough to make him want to hear more. The woman was Jane Grimes, wife of Hensonville's banker, Frederick Grimes!

Jane Grimes had never been involved in scandal, and she had left town two months before the murder. But what of her husband? Nobody had so much as considered the possibility. Now Sam Bates did. Frederick Grimes was near fifty and he had a young wife. Charlie Walsh had been a big operator, and he and Jane Grimes obviously had been lovers. Now, Jane Grimes had been deceived by a combination of circumstances—the superficial resemblance of Sam Bates to Charlie Walsh, Sam's possession of Char-

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lie's red car, the park which must have been their trysting place, and darkness.

Sam caressed the back of Jane Grimes' neck, holding her head on his shoulder so she would not turn and see his face. "Tell me about it, doll," he whispered into her ear.

Jane sobbed and clutched Sam as she spoke, almost frenziedly articulating the thoughts that had wordlessly churned inside her for months. "He flew out to see me every week. He was looking for an Eastern bank to invest in, but he was terribly slow about it. He was in no hurry to leave Hensonville himself, but he made me promise not to come back or even to write to anyone here. I was so frightened of what he might do after he caught us. You know how angry he was, darling. I . . ."

Jane drew her head back and looked into Sam's eyes. Calmer now, she saw the man who was there where previously she had seen the man she wanted to see. Recoiling from Sam, she pushed her slim shoulders back against the door.

"Charlie Walsh is dead, Mrs. Grimes," Sam said softly, sensing that his best tactic was to offset the shock of her recognition of him with a greater one.

He saw her eyes go wide, their whites reflecting what little light there was in the murky car. She seemed frozen in place.

"I'm Sam Bates, Mrs. Grimes. I bought Charlie's car after he was murdered." Sam realized by her gasp that the word "murdered" piled additional shock upon that caused by the harsh enough "dead" which he had used previously.

Sam looked away as she began to cry softly, then reached for her hand and held it gently. Finally she spoke.

"He promised not to do anything if I left town and never came back." Her voice was steady but her tone was lifeless. She stared through the windshield of the red car and seemed to be talking to herself more than to Sam. "He always was good to my parents. My father hasn't been able to work for years and Frederick takes care of him and mother. I don't know what will happen to them now."

She stopped, sobbing again. Sam gave her his handkerchief in a wordless gesture of sympathy, his feeling for her tempered by his own memory of isolation from the town for weeks past.

"Your husband made you promise not to write?" he asked.

"Yes," she sobbed. "There was no one I cared to write to here

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but—but Charlie." She broke down again as she mentioned the murdered man's name. "I always hated this town. We had no friends. My husband is a machine for making money. He built a big house and put me in it for an ornament. I stood it for five years and then—when Charlie . . ."

Sam now knew all that was necessary, except how Jane Grimes had come to find him in the park.

"I flew to the city and rented a car to drive to Hensonville," she told him. "I just had to see Charlie again, promise or no promise. I waited until after dark so no one would recognize me, and then I drove to his apartment. When I didn't see a light I drove around town looking for him. Not finding his red car on the streets, I thought he might be out here with another woman. I was certain of it when I saw the car here. This is one of the places we came together. It's where Frederick found us and we had that terrible row. I . . ." She fell into Sam's arms as she broke down this time. He held her gently for a long time until she was calm again.

She was the one to suggest going to see the sheriff. This surprised Sam, who had feared her reaction to the idea and had been trying to find the right words to tell her what the two of them had to do. He gave a sigh of relief.

The moon was high but veiled by clouds as they drove slowly toward town. Sam hadn't raced his engine in neutral when he started the car this time. The defiance that had been his dominant characteristic for weeks was gone from him. There was no sense of triumph in anticipation of what was to come when they reached the sheriff's. Sam just felt terribly sorry for Jane Grimes. For her husband he felt nothing.

"Probably got rid of the murder weapon at once," Sheriff Tom Jackson said to Sam Bates and Jane Grimes, picking up the phone to call back the two city detectives who were working the case. The sheriff had quickly seen the import of the story told him by the couple who had come to his home and roused him from bed.

"The police knew you were innocent, Mr. Bates," one of the city detectives said to Sam hours later, near dawn, as the detectives, Sam, Jane, and Sheriff Jackson all sat around the sheriff's oilcloth-covered kitchen table with empty coffee cups and full ashtrays before them. "We never suspected Mr. Grimes though," he went on. "He must have done it, all right, but how are we going to prove it?"

Jane Grimes said little. She had cried herself out while in the car

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with Sam, and now she sat dry-eyed while Sam told the story. She showed no desire to help her husband.

Neither Sam nor Jane left the sheriff's house that day. They were detained there, under guard, while the sheriff and the two detectives quietly built their case against Frederick Grimes. Until they were ready to charge him, the police wanted Grimes to remain ignorant of his wife's presence in Hensonville.

Sam's car was seen outside of Sheriff Jackson's house that morning and his absence from work that day led immediately to the rumor of his arrest. By ten o'clock the rumor had flowed up and down the main street and into the bank. Grimes was not the first person who had asked Sheriff Jackson about it by the time the sheriff made his way to the bank just past noon. To his other questioners the sheriff had refused comment. He wanted them to speculate and he wanted Grimes, in particular, to become anxious. Ostensibly the sheriff was at the bank to cash a travel voucher for the two out-of-town detectives, a normal occurrence. Actually he was there to offer Grimes the chance to put his head into the hangman's noose.

"Keep it under your hat, Mr. Grimes," said the sheriff. "We think we've got our man. We're keeping Sam Bates at my house instead of the station because we're not quite ready to charge him. He flunked the lie detector test and we know he had the motive—Charlie Walsh was beating his time with Helen Pringle. We checked with a psychologist from the city, and he thinks Sam really bought Charlie's car because he subconsciously wants to get caught. What we need to wrap up the case is either the murder weapon or a confession—preferably both. Sam Bates isn't too smart, Mr. Grimes," the sheriff concluded, "and those city detectives are real good at sweating a man. We'll get him."

As the sheriff pushed the brass plate on the heavy bank door and went down the granite steps, Frederick Grimes watched him thoughtfully. Then he went to his private office and closed the door behind him. Grimes did not go out to lunch that day, but remained at his desk until the bank closed. Then he drove straight to the big house on the edge of town in which he had lived alone except for his housekeeper since his wife went East. The two policemen watching his home from the woods behind it reported nothing over their walkie-talkies until past midnight.

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At twelve-thirty the housekeeper's small car emerged from Grimes' big garage. Grimes, its sole occupant, drove away from town, the police making no effort to follow, knowing Grimes would watch to see if he were tailed. Instead, state police were alerted in Barton, the next town east. Meanwhile, police watched the roads back into Hensonville.

Grimes never reached Barton, but turned off on a side road and circled back to Hensonville, the stakeout on the park road spotting him as he went by. The park had been deduced as virtually the only place Grimes could plant the murder weapon in incrimination of Sam Bates. The sheriff was already there waiting, and men were stationed along each of the spokelike roads leading from the park's lake.

Grimes stopped along one of the side roads and for a time sat motionless in the car, listening. The only sound was the chirping of crickets. Then he quietly left the car and walked several yards from the road into the dark woods. When he returned, the beams of several strong flashlights struck him almost simultaneously. He held a small shovel in one gloved hand and a revolver in the other.

"Where were you going to plant it, Mr. Grimes?" asked Sheriff Jackson softly. "In the bushes near one of the places Sam Bates has been camping out?"

"I refuse to say anything until I've consulted my attorney," Grimes said calmly, and spoke not another word. He didn't have to. The sheriff's ruse had worked, and Charlie Walsh's murderer was on ice. The case was closed.

Sam Bates did not find his triumph enjoyable. The townspeople still turned silently away from him, although now for a different reason—their shame. Sam continued to drive the red station wagon around town, showing its black racing stripe like a flag of small-town bigotry. He asked no more local girls to go out in the car with him. He roomed now at the Hensonville Inn, where Brody gave him a special monthly rate. One evening Brody suggested that he and Sam shoot pool together, but Sam said no, he had a book he wanted to finish. Brody didn't ask again.

After a time Sam was offered a transfer and promotion to another government job, in the East, near the city to which Jane Grimes had returned to live with her parents.

Sam had thought often of Jane since the trial. Now as he prepared to drive East, camping out in his red station wagon along the way, he thought of her again, and patted the faded brown stain on the front seat beside him—for luck.

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The insight of some people may have considerable impact on others.

A FRIEND IN NEED



by Carroll Mayers

THERE were several diverse cliques that patronized Jerry's Tavern, an unpretentious neighborhood establishment (no blaring jukebox, no television, no pinball machine) with a regular clientele seeking a snug haven for an evening. Of these, one small group was particularly unique: Charlie, a widower for some years, had recently rewed. Floyd was a retired bachelor who lived with his married sister. Lester, a pensioned railroader whose hearing was failing, also was unmarried and lived alone. Miss Hatch, a thin-faced spinster, worked for a cheap lawyer in a grubby little office.

Some strange chemistry of the lonely, an unvoiced yearning, had drawn the four into a state of warm rapport. Platitudes were discarded for serious observations.

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Books were discussed, and politics, and current events. Frequently, they played cards, with Jerry himself participating whenever the opportunity arose.

One night, Floyd, Lester and Miss Hatch were playing rummy when Charlie came in. Charlie was a balding little man with a harried expression who was fighting the realization that his six months' remarriage had been a horrible mistake, that his second wife's domineering character, her concern only for herself, was beginning to make him physically ill, affecting his work as a bank vault custodian.



Charlie approached his friends' table and slumped onto a chair. "Thought I'd drop by for a minute," he said dully.

Miss Hatch's gaze was shrewd behind her thick lenses. "Is there anything wrong?"

Charlie made a vague gesture. "Just another of those infernal headaches."

Lester cocked his ear. "Headache?"

"Yes," Charlie said, "I've had this one three days."

"That's a shame," Miss Hatch said.

Floyd nodded. "It is. You should see a doctor."

"I'm going to," Charlie said. "I'm on my way now." His thin smile was without humor. "Not that I imagine there's much he can do. If I could just relax a little, I think I'd be all right."

Miss Hatch's bony fingers plucked at her cards. "Your wife?" she suggested.

"Yes," Charlie said. "Every night, it's the same thing. I no sooner get home than it's do this or do that; go here or go there; pay attention." Charlie's shoulders

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sagged. "I'm tired; just plain tired."

"You should tell her so," Floyd said.

"Certainly," Lester agreed. "You're only human."

Charlie said, "You all know Belle. You know I can't tell her anything."

Miss Hatch sniffed. "Then let the doctor tell her."

Charlie stood up wearily. "I'll see what he says. Maybe he can give me something."

Lester's look was concerned. "Let us know."

"I will," Charlie said. "I'll stop by tomorrow night."

After Charlie had departed, they endeavored to resume the card game without success. "Maybe the doctor *can* help him," Floyd said hopefully.

Miss Hatch jammed the cards back into their box. "The woman ought to have better sense," she said, "driving Charlie that way."

Jerry had gone down to the cellar for some club soda. When they heard the door squeak as he returned, they motioned him over and Miss Hatch told him about Charlie. Jerry was wheezing a bit from climbing the stairs which seemed to grow steeper every year, but Charlie's plight distressed him more.

In sober truth, Jerry had a special affinity for the little group, being essentially a simple man himself. When, for instance, a wag once suggested sparking up the tavern by redesignating the washrooms as 'Dolls' and 'Dudes' or perhaps 'Queens' and 'Kings', the proprietor's mild blue gaze had grown so chill that the wit instantly subsided, and the neat placards remained 'Ladies' and 'Gentlemen'.

"Doggoned shame," Jerry said after he'd heard Miss Hatch's account. It was clearly a mutual sentiment.

The following night, Charlie returned as he had promised. Miss Hatch dispensed with any possible preliminaries. "What did the doctor say?" she asked.

Charlie's expression was sober. "He gave me a thorough examination," he said. "He told me there's nothing really serious, but I've got to slow down, take things easier after work."

Miss Hatch's head bobbed emphatically. "Then that's all there is to it. Now that your wife understands—"

"But she doesn't," Charlie sighed. "Belle says I'm being childish; that it's all my imagination. We had a fight after dinner tonight."

Floyd looked distraught. "A fight?"

"An argument," Charlie amended. He passed a hand across his

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forehead, winced. "It made my headache worse."

Floyd and Lester and Miss Hatch exchanged worried glances. After a moment, Lester picked up the card box, managed a small smile. "Why don't we—"

Charlie shook his head. "I'm afraid I couldn't concentrate. Besides—"

"Yes?" Miss Hatch prompted.

"Well, Belle says I shouldn't come here. She—" Charlie hesitated, then finished simply, "she says it's a disreputable place."

Miss Hatch's eyes popped. "That's ridiculous!"

"It certainly is," Lester agreed.

"She can't be serious," Floyd protested.

Charlie wasn't listening. "Perhaps some air will help my headache," he said. "I think I'll take a walk before I go home."

Nobody answered him; at the moment, there didn't seem to be anything to say.

After Charlie had left, Jerry came over to the table. "Things any better with Charlie?"

Their expressions gave him his answer.

"That bad?"

Miss Hatch amplified how bad. "There must be something we can do," she finished. "We're all Charlie's friends. There must be some way to help."

Floyd looked at Jerry and Jerry looked at Lester and they all looked at Miss Hatch. It was quite evident everyone was in agreement. It was equally evident nobody had any suggestion.

Charlie did not appear the next night, nor the next. The following evening, however, a shattering development materialized when Belle stormed into the little tavern.

A large brunette with a petulant mouth, Belle transfixed the occupants with a single sweep of snapping black eyes.

"Where's my husband?" she demanded.

Everyone in the place could only goggle at her. At their table, Floyd and Miss Hatch flinched. Jerry and Lester were fiddling with the bar radio, hiking the volume for Lester's benefit.

Belle stamped a foot. "Turn that thing down and answer me! Where's Charlie?"

Jerry recovered somewhat, lowered the volume. "Charlie hasn't been in tonight, ma'am," he told Belle.

"No?"

"No, ma'am."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Hmph! I suppose I'll have to believe you." Belle's concession was icy. "I'll never understand," she added, "why anyone would want

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to waste time in a miserable spot like this."

Miss Hatch's mouth twitched; her voice shook but she managed to get the words out. "Charlie comes to see us," she told Belle. "We're his friends."

"And a sorry lot you all are!"

A tic jumped in Floyd's cheek. "You—you shouldn't snap at Miss Hatch that way."

Belle's laugh was scornful. "I'll talk to her—I'll talk to all of you—as I please!"

Belle then proceeded to do precisely that. She knew them all just as they knew her, and after some caustic generalities she called Miss Hatch a myopic old biddy and Lester and Floyd prime examples of senility. She classed Jerry as a stupid publican with a partiality for crones and gaffers.

Her lashing tongue was unsparing and when she finally stalked out her spiteful words hung in the air, dinning into their brains and searing pride the years had left uncertain.

Lester looked sick, and went to the men's room. When he returned, he slumped in his chair. "She—she had no right to say those things," he muttered. "She's no lady."

Miss Hatch said, "She's a mean, vicious woman. I feel terribly sorry for Charlie."

No one else said anything. There was no need; Miss Hatch had phrased it for all of them.

It was stormy the following night, with a chill, lashing rain. Miss Hatch, Floyd and Lester were the tavern's only patrons; what with the weather and his recent absenteeism, they really did not expect Charlie.

At mid-evening, however, Charlie appeared. Miss Hatch made a swift decision. "Don't mention Belle," she whispered. "We'll just have a nice sociable evening." She looked up smiling as Charlie approached.

Charlie did not return Miss Hatch's smile. "I can't stay," he announced glumly. "Belle's positively forbidden me to come here anymore." His faded gray eyes were misty.

They were stunned. It was unthinkable Charlie should no longer be one of them.

Miss Hatch finally voiced her disbelief. "But she doesn't understand. You've *got* to come here. To relax!"

"Belle says no," Charlie rejoined simply.

Jerry started to say something but Charlie shook his head. "I—I just wanted to let you know," he concluded. Then he turned and left them.

After a moment, Floyd got up,

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peered out the steaming window. "He's taking another walk," he announced soberly. "In the rain."

Miss Hatch was almost in tears. "He's miserable! Just miserable! If only there was something we could do."

Jerry said, "Charlie *could* stand up to Belle, demand his rights. He probably should. But even if he did, things would likely get worse." He adjusted his apron. "I've been thinking," he finished abruptly. "Maybe there *is* something we can do."

They regarded him curiously. "What do you mean?" Lester said.

Jerry surveyed his small audience with somber intensity. He coughed once as if his breathing might be about to give him trouble, but then his voice steadied. "Listen . . ." Jerry began.

When he finished, all eyes studiously examined the floor. Nobody spoke.

Jerry coughed again. "Well?"

Their heads lifted, dubiously.

Floyd cleared his throat. "I . . . don't know." He glanced at Miss Hatch.

Miss Hatch was looking at Jerry. "Suppose someone should come in?" she asked.

"With the weather, there's a good chance no one will. If anyone should, we just don't go ahead."

Lester had been straining to catch every word. "You mean . . . tonight?"

Jerry nodded. "We'll never have a better chance."

Miss Hatch began polishing her glasses vigorously. "How would we get her here?"

Jerry said, "Suppose we told her Charlie was meeting another woman?"

Miss Hatch snorted. "She'd never believe it!"

"Of course not!" Floyd echoed. "It's not Charlie's character."

Jerry conceded, "No, it's not. But if Belle suspected Charlie was flaunting her orders, was doing it for spite . . ."

Another period of silence ensued. Lester was first to break it. "Maybe we could," he said softly. "Miss Hatch, you could do it. You could phone her."

Miss Hatch almost dropped her glasses. "You—you think so?"

Floyd reassured her, his own hesitancy abruptly dissolving in the subtly contagious decision. "You could do it," Floyd said.

Miss Hatch's hands were still shaking; she took a long minute replacing her glasses. Then she drew a deep breath, went to the phone. With the others grouped tensely around her, Miss Hatch called Belle.

When the receiver squawked acknowledgement, Miss Hatch

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spoke—a whispered delivery to evade recognition, with just the proper brevity.

"If you're wondering why your husband really keeps visiting that tavern called Jerry's," Miss Hatch declaimed, "you might check a certain bleached blonde. They're both there now." Then she hung up.

Floyd beamed at her. "Perfect!"

Jerry bustled them from the phone. "Remember," he admonished, "if anyone comes in, we stop it." Then he quickly did what he had to do.

Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes. The rain kept lashing at the window and they all literally held their breaths. Then Belle stormed in.

"Where's my husband?" Belle's dark eyes darted about the premises.

Jerry answered her. "Charlie isn't here, ma'am."

"I know better!"

"You're mistaken, ma'am." Jerry sounded sincere, but his gaze appeared to shy away from the men's room.

"Don't tell me that! He's not home—he's here with some hussy! You saw me coming—" Belle broke off, catching the shift of Jerry's vision.

Abruptly, she crossed, wrenched open the door marked, 'Gentlemen', darted inside. Belle's scream snapped short as the fall broke her neck.

They immediately called the police, explaining how Belle apparently had been convinced of Charlie's hiding on the premises, trying to avoid her, and how she had tumbled down the steep cellar stairs, unable to check herself after she'd stormed through the door.

Of course, the police never knew about Jerry shifting the 'Gentlemen' placard back to its proper location before their arrival.

So it went into the books as an accidental death and after a decent interval Charlie rejoined his friends almost nightly.

In essence, Belle had asked for it. Lester had said she was no lady, and it appeared Lester was right. No lady would ever burst unceremoniously into a men's washroom. No true lady, that is.



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As Swinburne so aptly wrote, "For the glass of the years is brittle wherein we gaze for a span."

Not the KILLER TYPE



I, Craig Robertson, presumably sound of body and wit, mean these notes to be read in the event, and only in the event, that there should be anything violent, unusual, or even slightly suspicious about my death.

I have reason to believe there will be.

Last week I attended, for the first time, a class reunion at my old university and, melodramatic as it sounds, my past caught up with me. On the final evening of the reunion a few dozen of us crowded into the cocktail lounge of the hotel where we were staying, and I sat on my bar stool, hoisted my Scotch and soda, and lost myself in the general gaiety. I hardly noticed the man who slid onto the stool next to mine—until he spoke.

"Craig! Craig Robertson!"

The voice shocked me, the voice and the eyes of the man who had joined me. His face had matured and was now unfamiliar, but he had the same sandy hair, the same voice, the same challenging blue eyes that I remembered.

Those eyes were really what I recognized. They were not only challenging, but flat, implacable, merciless.

He misunderstood the blank

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look on my face as we shook hands. "Nick," he identified himself cheerfully. "Nick Murdock. Now, don't tell me you've forgotten?"

"Of course I haven't forgotten, Nick," I said as heartily as I could manage. "How could I ever forget!"

I was being quite truthful. How *could* I ever forget? After all, twenty years ago I had murdered this man.

For two decades I'd tried to tell myself that I'd failed to kill him, knowing all along that that wasn't true. Nick Murdock was dead. Yet here he was beside me, his handsome face unscarred, radiating the same ruthlessness, the same savage energy he'd had as a boy.

I had never bought a school yearbook, and had scarcely glanced at the reunion registration list. Even if I had spotted his name, it would never have occurred to me that a dead man might be one of my classmates.

If Nick were actually still alive, he would be a couple of years older than I, but in the days before and after the Korean War it was quite common for classmates to be several years apart in age. I might have seen him at a distance on campus any number of times; but with a university population of twenty-odd thousand attending half a dozen widely separated schools, it wouldn't have been unusual if our paths had never crossed.

"So what have you been doing with yourself, Craig?"

My throat seemed paralyzed, and I had to force myself to make the usual small talk and to answer Nick's questions. I gave him a fast rundown. I'd been with the army in Korea . . . got married and had three kids . . . picked up a Ph.D. and now taught art history over in Indiana.

He, it seemed, had been too much on the go ever to marry. He'd become interested in photography and done quite well in the field of photo journalism, had traveled all over the world and, in fact, had just returned from Vietnam.

The conversation was so normal that I could almost have been persuaded that that night twenty years before had been a dream.

He asked how my parents were, and I said they were fine, and I asked, "And yours? How's your brother?"

He looked surprised. "Jerry? Didn't you know? Jerry was killed years ago."

All my apprehension returned. Somehow I knew what was coming.

"Killed?" My voice wavered.

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"You mean killed in the war?"

Nick shook his head. "He never made it to the war. He was killed in an accident. Burned to death. That damn tent I had out back of the house caught fire."

So that terrible autumn night had not been a dream.

I had killed all right, but I had not killed Nick Murdock. I had killed his younger brother, Jerry. Years after the fact, I was discovering that I had killed the wrong boy. Not only had I committed a murder, but I had murdered a complete innocent.

"Hey, are you okay?" Nick asked.

"Hot in here," I said. "Don't worry. It'll pass."

"Maybe you need some fresh air."

"No, no, I'm all right. Sorry to hear about Jerry. That must have happened after we left town."

He nodded thoughtfully. "About the same time, I believe. Yes, just about the same time."

Unwillingly, I forced myself to ask the expected question. "Did you ever find out what caused the fire?"

"Not exactly. But do you remember all the gasoline-powered equipment I had in that tent, Craig?"

"Several lamps. A stove. The heater."

"That's right, close to two gallons of gasoline. Any gas-powered device can be treacherous, you know—you just don't monkey around with them if you don't know what you're doing. And the kid didn't know much about them. Apparently he tried to adjust the heater or something . . . knocked it over . . . dropped it . . ."

My forehead was damp and my palms were clammy, and I barely heard what Nick went on to say. I was remembering what he had done to my sister Ellen—and what I had done to his brother.

I must make one important point. What I did, I did under extreme provocation. Obviously there was a time in my life when I could kill, but I am not a killer by nature. When I was in Korea, I had all I could do to hold the sights steady and squeeze off the shot, and today any act of violence sickens me. If ever a man were purged of the killer-instinct, I am that man.

The same could never be said for Nick Murdock.

Nick was the most unbridled kid I have ever known, a born fighter and a born winner, the kind of boy who would rather die than lose. From an insult to a beating, nobody ever licked him permanently. Every challenger paid

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later, and paid badly, no exceptions.

I remember once when, by some freak, another kid managed to pin him and hammered his head against a rock, trying to make him admit defeat. When the kid was at last in tears, frightened by what he was doing and by his inability to make Nick yield, Nick finally threw him off, and what followed was the next thing to a massacre. To this day I believe it was sheer luck that Nick didn't kill the boy.

He had followers, especially his brother Jerry who idolized him, but he wasn't a leader. He was too much a loner. He made his own rules, and laughed at all others, self-confident and self-sufficent. It was no wonder the rest of us kids looked up to him with a kind of awe.

One of Nick's great passions was his tent. It was a magnificent tent, a good twelve by twelve feet, and God only knows where it had been obtained during those war years. It was presented to him the spring he was sixteen, and he at once pitched it in the woods behind the Murdock house and proceeded to live in it, even sleeping in it every night. During the daytime younger kids like Jerry and myself were allowed to inspect and admire it in Nick's presence, but otherwise we were commanded to stay far away.

When autumn came, Nick was forced to go back indoors, but the next summer he was seventeen, and he swore he was going to spend the entire fall and winter out in that tent. After all, he said, he was already old enough for the Marines, and when he graduated from high school next spring, he was going to join up. None of us kids doubted that he would be the deadliest Marine the Corps ever had.

That was the summer my sister Ellen started going with Nick.

Ellen was the object of considerable envy. You see, the Murdocks were rich. In a way, they were the town's "first family." They ran the town's two major industries, a canning company and a sewing machine factory, and they lived in a huge Queen Anne house which sat well back on ten acres of lawn and woods.

My family, on the other hand, lived in a small seven-room white-shingled house, and my father was a maintenance engineer for Mr. Murdock.

So you can understand why all eyes were on Ellen and Nick that summer. She was his girl, the only "steady girl" he'd ever had, and everybody knew it. She was the girl he'd leave behind when he joined the Marines next spring and, if her luck held, she would

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be the girl he'd marry and settle down with when he got back.

My parents, I remember, were both proud of their daughter and worried about her. They were quite puritanical in the upbringing of their children, and Ellen had a rebellious spark. Inevitably there were certain rumors about Nick and her, rumors which resulted in more than one small-boy scrap for me.

Day after day the two were seen together, evening after evening, my sister and Nick Murdock. They sat together in the confectionary, they strolled together hand-in-hand through the small park, they disappeared together at parties—and one night in early September Ellen didn't return home from her date with Nick.

My father's angry voice awakened me in the middle of the night. He telephoned the Murdocks and talked with Nick. Nick said that he and Ellen had quarreled over something inconsequential and that she had walked out on him; he had no idea of where she was.

My father called the police, and the next morning he talked to Nick again. My sister didn't come home that day or the following night.

The next day her body was found in the river.

When the story got out that she had been pregnant, everybody in town knew what had happened.

Nick wouldn't have married her, not adventurous, untamable Nick. He wouldn't have been tied down at seventeen with a wife and a child, and Ellen would never have dared to tell her parents what had happened. Before she would have faced them with the truth, she would have died—and she did.

I held Nick Murdock responsible for that.

I had never before realized how much my older sister meant to me, and now I found out. I also found out what it's like to hear your father cry, and to watch your mother age and shrink and look through eyes blinded by pain.

I dreamed of revenge. What fifteen-year-old boy wouldn't have? I envisioned myself torturing Nick Murdock. I saw myself shooting him, cutting him, garroting him. Every day and every night was filled with dreams of making him suffer, making him die slowly and painfully, for what he had done.

In November I learned that we were leaving town. The pain and the disgrace of Ellen's death were too much for my parents, and my father would no longer work for Mr. Murdock. We were moving downstate, where my father had accepted another job.

I was glad, except for one thing.

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The move would put space between Nick and me and delay any possible revenge to an unforeseeable future.

I remember the day of the move quite well. It was crisply cold, the autumn closing in fast. Thanksgiving Day was at hand, and already the dying leaves lay thick and browning on the ground. For some reason the moving company was delayed and didn't arrive until late in the afternoon. By the time the men had finished, it was dark, and my father decided we should stay overnight at a motel on the edge of town and start the trip downstate early the next morning.

After a late supper in the motel dining room, I decided to take a walk and see the old town, perhaps for the last time. By then it was quite late, the streets were deserted, and the night was cold. I didn't want to see anyone. I had already said goodbye to my friends, and my mind was filled with the memory of Ellen.

The route I took back to the motel led by the Murdock house. Perhaps I had half-consciously planned it that way. If only there were something I could do before I left, something to avenge my sister . . .

Quietly I crossed the big Murdock lawn, trying to avoid the dead leaves in order not to make a sound. A few lights were on in the house, but I saw no one. I circled around the house, and there in back stood the tent.

The tent was barely visible in the darkness; but moving closer, still as silent as I could be, I saw the faintest glimmer of light from the canvas flap of the door.

I moved closer yet. What if Nick were in there? What would I do? What *could* I do to the boy who had caused my sister's death?

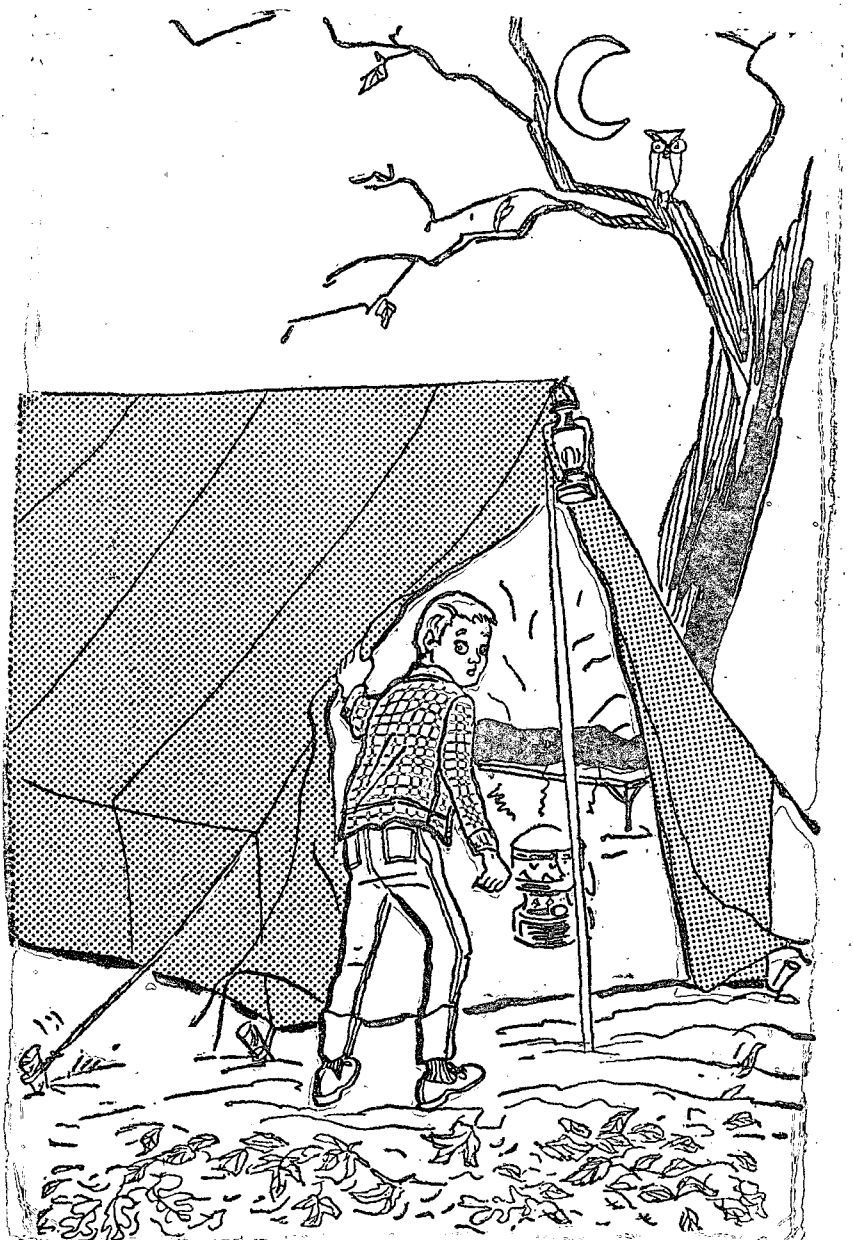
At the door of the tent I peered in through a slit at the edge of the flap. I could see very little: vague dark shapes and, near the ground, a soft glow.

The flap wasn't completely tied. Just one pair of strings near the bottom held it closed. Stooping down, I unfastened the strings without the slightest difficulty.

Without making a sound I entered the tent. I could see better now, and gradually I made out a couple of cots, a table with a camp stove on it, and several unlit lamps. Nick's sleeping bag was on one of the cots, someone huddled deep within it, unmoving. Apparently Nick was asleep and quite unaware of my presence.

The light came from a gasoline heater which stood on the ground near the center of the tent. It stood about twelve inches high, and emitted the faintest hissing sound.

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NOT THE KILLER TYPE

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It must have held almost a gallon of fuel.

I don't know how long I stood there, staring down at the sleeping bag, hating Nick; thinking of what he had done to my sister, to my parents, to me; thinking of how I wanted him to pay and how one day I would make him pay.

Suddenly my dreams of revenge seemed childish and futile. Never would I actually have the guts to do what I wanted to do. I was just a fifteen-year-old kid, bitter and helpless, and the time had come to leave the tent, go back to the motel, and forget all about Nick Murdock. I turned to go.

Then, without thinking at all, I picked up the heater and dashed it to the ground at the very side of Nick's cot.

The effect was explosive and blinding. At the very instant that the flames leaped over the cot, I twisted and ran from the tent. I hadn't gone a dozen steps when I heard screams, and I felt the hot red glow behind me. The trees turned a dusky pulsating pink ahead of me, and I strained to throw myself into the darkness beyond. The red light and the screams seemed to thrust me toward the darkness . . .

I found myself walking along the road, and the lights of the motel shone coldly ahead. *It didn't happen,* I told myself, *nothing has happened* . . .

In all the years since that night, I had tried to persuade myself that I hadn't really carried out my revenge, that nobody had really been hurt, that that night had been nothing but a bad dream—but forgetfulness was impossible. Only a few days after we'd arrived in our new town, my mother received a letter from a friend. "The Murdocks," I heard her say to my father, "have had an awful tragedy . . ." I didn't listen to anymore. I hurried to my room, threw myself onto my bed, and lay there in a cold sweat.

It didn't happen! Nothing has happened!

Yet it had happened. I had committed a murder, the wrong murder; and now, after all these years, I found myself sitting in a festive cocktail lounge with my intended victim, sipping whiskey, and talking about old times and old friends. No matter how I tried to turn the subject from Jerry's death, Nick insisted upon reverting to it, as if he were as haunted by that long-ago autumn night as I was.

"You know how Jerry was," he said, as we sat there, our heads close together. "Typical kid

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brother, I suppose, always wanting to do whatever I did. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"And I, big brother, was always inclined to cut the kid short. He always wanted to sleep out in that damn tent with me, and I always said no. When my folks showed signs of weakening, I reminded them of the gasoline lamps and so forth, and told them it was no place for a kid like Jerry. That was just an excuse not to have the kid around, of course. But as things turned out, how right I was."

"Yes," I said numbly, "you were right."

"It was pretty cold that night," he went on, as if I hadn't spoken, "and my mother insisted that I get a heater for the tent if I were determined to stay out there, so just before the stores closed—it was a Friday night, and they were open late—I went downtown and bought one. Came home, loaded it, and put it out in the tent to warm the place up, then went back into the house.

"Well, we thought Jerry had gone upstairs to bed, and maybe he had. But I guess he thought he saw his chance, and he sneaked out of the house and into the tent. He was going to sleep out there with his big brother. Maybe for once his big brother wouldn't kick him out. Maybe for once . . ."

Nick turned those cold blue eyes on me. His face was quite expressionless.

"When I first heard him scream, I just sat there in the livingroom. Then I ran out the back door, and I saw him come flaming out of that blazing tent . . .

"Craig, I've seen men burn to death since then. I've seen them burn in the Pacific and in Korea and in Vietnam. I've even taken pictures of them burning. But my own kid brother . . ."

Fortunately, at that moment some acquaintance of Nick's passed by, and Nick turned from me to chat with him. I felt as hot and stifled as if I were having a heart attack. I ordered another round of drinks and asked for a large glass of water. When Nick turned back to the bar again, he picked up his drink without speaking, and I thought with relief that the subject of Jerry's death was at last closed—but I was wrong.

Nick looked into his glass as if searching for a revelation in the crystal cubes, and he chuckled softly. "You must have hated my guts," he said.

Startled, I looked at him. "What are you talking about?"

"You know. You haven't forgotten, anymore than I have. You remember very well the story that went around, the story that I was

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responsible for your sister's pregnancy—and that I'd refused to marry her."

There was a new kind of tension between us now. "That's water over the dam," I said. "That was almost half a lifetime ago."

"But you *must* have hated me," he insisted. "I would have hated *you*. If I'd been you, I'd have tried to get even for what happened to Ellen. Craig, do you know what I would have done?"

"Nick, honestly, I couldn't care less—"

"One thing I might have done would be to set that tent on fire. I might have tried to burn Nick Murdock up in it. Of course, I might have burned Jerry Murdock by mistake—or I might have figured that a brother's life for a sister's was a fair exchange."

"You're crazy," I said. "You're talking sick. It was all a long time ago."

"Seems like yesterday, doesn't it?"

His manner was as casual and friendly as ever, and he was even smiling a little. He took out his cigarettes and offered me one, and I shook my head. He took one for himself and lit it.

"Tell me something," he said. "As you say, the water is long over the dam, so just for the hell of it, tell me. Did you try to kill me that night, thinking to even the score?"

I forced a laugh. "After all these years you're asking me—"

"After all these years I'm asking you, and if you won't answer directly, tell me this: How did you know I had a gasoline heater in the tent?"

"Why, you yourself just said—"

I broke off as I remembered that *I* was the one who had first mentioned the heater. He'd later mentioned that he'd bought it only the night that the tent had burned. Except by some highly improbable accident, I couldn't possibly have known about it.

"Well," I began fumblingly, "I just assumed—"

"You didn't assume anything."

"Nick, you can't be serious. After all this time, how could I possibly be expected to remember just what equipment—"

"I'm perfectly serious, Craig," he said, shaking his ice cubes and still smiling. "A thousand times I've gone over everything even remotely connected with that night, and I think you did just what I would have done. I think you sneaked into the tent that night and that you—"

"I don't care what you think," I interrupted harshly. "I didn't kill your brother, I didn't try to kill you. And if that's what you think, well . . ."

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Carried on by my own impetus, I then said the stupidest thing I have ever said in my entire life. I said the one thing I should never have said.

I said: "You can't prove a thing."

Nick looked at me sharply, and his smile disappeared. I noticed for the first time that he was sweating as much as I was. His face gleamed.

"That's right," he said after a moment. "I can't prove a thing. Anymore than you can prove that I was the one who got your sister in trouble. But, then, you and I don't have to prove anything, do we, Craig?"

I stared at him without finding a thing to say. His cruel blue eyes were hypnotic.

Suddenly he turned away, laughing. "Buddy, you should see the look on your face!"

"You've practically accused me of—"

"Don't you know a put-on when you hear one? Don't you know when you're being kidded?"

"Kidded!" If I hadn't been so shocked I'd have hit him. "This is your idea of a joke?"

"You never did have much sense of humor," he chuckled. "But as you said, how could I expect you to remember just what equipment I had in the tent? And if I did believe you killed Jerry, I wouldn't be such a fool as to warn you of my suspicions, would I? Not me, Craig—I'd do something about them!"

He finished his drink and slipped off his bar stool.

"Well, I'll see you around, Craig. I'll be seeing you, and you won't have to wait another twenty years." He grinned at me. "You can believe that, buddy."

He wandered off through the crowd.

I haven't seen Nick since then. Maybe he really was, as he said, just "putting me on," but I don't believe that for a minute.

No, I've changed over the years; and it's now utterly beyond me to kill a man; but Nick Murdock hasn't changed.

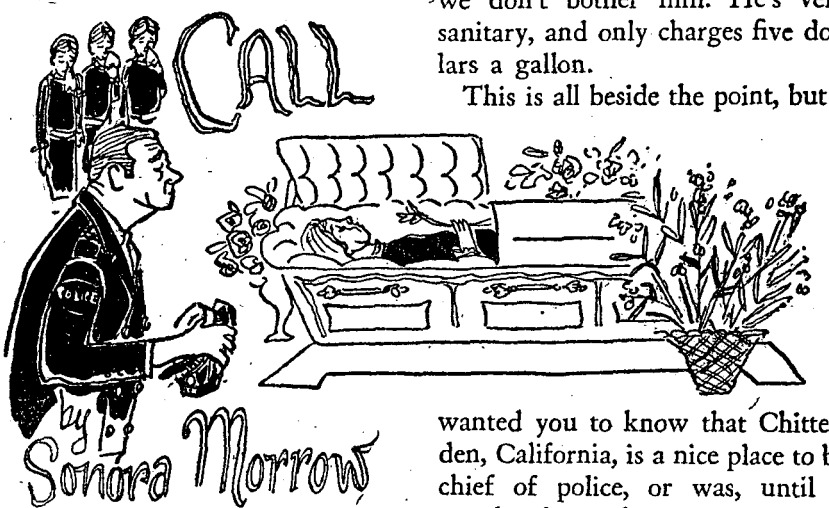
Nick can.



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Many avocations are not so limited in scope that they yield pleasure to only one.

COURTESY CALL



by Sonora Morrow

A SMALL-TOWN police chief like me has a lot more leeway than a big city cop. We don't have a fancy lab or a far-flung communication system but, heck, we don't need it. We get a few apple-stealers and a little rock-throwing, local kid stuff; and some speeders, transient-tourist stuff. Once in a while we knock over a farmer's still, but only if it's real dirty. Good, clean, cheap whiskey is hard to come by, and even though all of us on the force know Lars Kipple is making the stuff, we don't bother him. He's very sanitary, and only charges five dollars a gallon.

This is all beside the point, but I wanted you to know that Chitterden, California, is a nice place to be chief of police, or was, until a couple of months ago.

We were all sorry when Eliza Chitterden died. The eldest of the four Chitterden girls whose father had founded the town, she had lived with her sisters in the mansion on the hill, and lived well on the money the old man had left. His mine had petered out thirty years before, but he'd invested his profits wisely. He had ruled his home with an iron hand since his

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wife died during the birth of Kate in 1920. He lived to be ninety-two without a trace of senility, and no young man who had ever come courting found favor with him. "They're all after my money," he'd say.

Eliza was sixty-two, Janet was fifty-eight, Sarah, fifty-five, and Kate, forty-seven. A heart attack took Eliza, was Doc Kilton's diagnosis.

It was a beautiful funeral and afterward, naturally, I had to make a courtesy call. I knew the girls by sight but had never met them socially. The Victorian home was surrounded by ten acres of trees, grass and flowers. A wrought iron spiked fence enclosed it, but the gates had always been open since I could remember.

I took Sergeant, my German shepherd, who's been my sole companion since I got him seven years ago. He's usually very well behaved, but he couldn't resist the trees and the grass. I let him run and romp for a few minutes, then ordered him to lie down on the porch, which he did with reproachful brown eyes.

The Misses Janet, Sarah and Kate, dressed in black, greeted me. I was invited in for tea and cookies and we all sat in the huge living-room dominated by the twelve foot fireplace. It was November, and while it never really gets *cold* in California, the blazing log felt good.

A maid and a butler tiptoed in and out, bringing messages to Miss Janet and refurbishing the tea tray. I hardly knew what to say after extending my condolences which were quietly received.

"Uh, Miss Kate, I understand you're the gardener in the family—the flowers are beautiful."

She had a nice smile in an unlined face topped by soft brown hair. "Thank you, Chief. I do hope you'll let me give you a bouquet of my best fall flowers before you leave."

I nodded my thanks and bit into a flaky apple tart. "These tarts are excellent, so light."

"I made them," Miss Sarah said shyly. "I do all the baking of bread, rolls and pastries, and on Thursdays, cook's day off, I prepare all the meals. I do so love a kitchen." Sarah did not look her fifty-five, probably through all good habits and no vices, but some makeup and a hairdresser could have done a lot for her. I thought, too, a belt of Kipple homemade probably wouldn't have hurt.

As I looked at the three of them, I decided that a night on the town would do all of them some good.

Miss Janet stood up. "So nice of you to come, Chief." It was a dis-

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missal, and I wondered if having a fifty-two year old bachelor around made her nervous.

I stood too. "Thank you for your kindness. You know I am always at your service."

Miss Kate followed me out to the front yard with shears and a basket. "I'll just cut you a few flowers."

Sergeant trailed us, sniffed at Miss Kate and growled a little.

"It's all right," I assured Miss Kate. "He's not used to women. Probably a little jealous."

Twenty minutes later I left with a large basket of pink and white oleander, red roses, marguerites, and a small potted holly. Miss Sarah, too, had rushed out with *her* contribution. The bread was wrapped in a fresh tea towel and the half dozen apple tarts showed through neatly folded wax paper. Miss Janet didn't even wave at me, but you can't win them all.

I thought a lot about the Chitterden sisters, that beautiful big house, all that money. They would be easy prey for fortune hunters, so anxious were they for male companionship. However, I felt Miss Janet was equal to the occasion; *she* had enough Chitterden in her to protect the younger two. I determined to keep an eye on them myself and instructed my officers to let me know of any newcomers to our town. Wealthy spinsters, even in remote towns like ours, are usually discovered in some devious way by con men and marrying drifters.

On the day I returned the flower basket and the tea towel, laundered and ironed by my landlady, I found Miss Kate in her garden.

"Oh, Chief," she called out to me as I walked up the path to the porch, "how nice to see you. Do come and see my flowers." Taking the basket, she set it on the ground, then led me along a brick walk. "My hydrangea has such large blossoms, don't they look like snowballs?"

I mumbled in the affirmative and continued to admire bushes and flowers I'd seen, but never knew their names—pyracantha, lupin, star anise, wild grape and wisteria.

Finally, we sat down on a cement bench under a large pepper tree.

Miss Kate was wearing the Chitterden uniform, a dark blue, long sleeved dress, dark stockings and sensible black shoes. However, she was not unattractive, although because of her life she was not overendowed with personality.

She looked at me out of clear blue eyes. "I would like your advice on something."

"Of course, Miss Kate."

"Do you think forty-seven is too

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late to see the world? I mean the *real* world. Father took us to San Francisco thirty years ago and we enjoyed it so. I watched the ships come and go from our hotel windows and I thought then how wonderful it would be to get on one of those ships and travel all around the world." Her eyes shone with the thought.

I had to smile. "Ma'am, you have the money, the time, and the inclination—there's nothing to stop you. But if you go, please let me caution you about making friends. Criminals of all kinds gravitate to wealth like pins to a magnet."

"Oh, I know about that kind of thing."

I was surprised. "You do?"

"Two whole shelves of Father's library contain information about murders, confidence men, swindlers, phony stock and real estate methods and, oh . . . all kinds of things."

The old man had been as smart as I'd thought.

"Then I say you should go. You know the old saying, 'It's later than you think'."

She gave me a thank-you smile. "Come on, I'll take you to the kitchen to see Sarah. It's her cooking and baking day."

"How about Miss Janet?"

"She's gone to see our lawyer and the minister. She won't be back for at least an hour or so."

The kitchen smelled of baking bread, simmering meat and onions. It was a huge room, clean and full of sunshine, with copper pots and pans and utensils hanging everywhere. It was old-fashioned in some respect. The large stove must have been forty years old, but a dinner for one hundred could easily have been cooked by it. Sarah, almost completely enveloped by a large white starched apron, stood before a large table in the center of the room, rolling out large rounds of dough. When she saw me she wiped her hands on her apron.

"Chief, how good to see you. Please come and have some coffee."

The three of us sat around the middle table, sipping delicious coffee.

"Chief," Sarah looked at me as a small child looks at a Christmas tree, "has Kate mentioned our thoughts on going around the world?"

"She has, and I think it's a great idea."

They smiled and nodded at each other. "I think we can even talk Janet into it," Sarah said.

Kate shrugged. "We can try."

A few minutes later, as I was regaling them with a story about a still we had destroyed, a stentorian voice rang out. "Ladies, we do *not*

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entertain visitors in the kitchen." It was Miss Janet looming in the doorway.

Both Sarah and Kate looked stricken.

"I—I had hoped to invite the chief to dinner tonight, Janet," Sarah said. "I'm making my special lamb stew with dumplings."

"Perhaps some other time," the eldest sister canceled the invitation.

I made as graceful an exit as possible, after thanking them for their hospitality.

At nine the next morning Doc Kilton called to tell me Janet Chitterden had died of a heart attack.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Of course I'm sure," he retorted rather testily. "Been treating her and Eliza for a couple of years, giving them proper doses of digitalis, supervising their diets and activities. Her manner of death had all the symptoms of a heart that just got tired of pumping."

Now I'm a small-town cop, but I'm not stupid. It's one thing for a family to have a medical history of heart disease, but when two of the members, hard-core spinsters with no wish to make changes, die, well . . . Survivors where millions are concerned are always suspect whether anything can be proved or not.

However, everyone knew the sisters shared equally, that they were well over twenty-one and could do as they pleased, so I couldn't figure a motive. I also found it hard to suspect flower-loving Kate and baker-cook Sarah of foul deeds of any kind. Consequently I attended the funeral, extended my condolences to the two remaining sisters, and let it go.

Over the ensuing months I spent every Thursday evening at the Chitterden mansion, enjoying Sarah's gourmet dinners, Kate's floral displays, and three-handed cribbage. Sometimes Kate played the piano and we all three sang the old songs everyone knows. Considering there was no television or radio, it wasn't bad at all. I always brought Sergeant, but he refused to come into the house, and curled up on the front porch to wait for me. Sarah had instructed the cook to save all bones for him, but he'd never touch them.

One evening as we enjoyed our coffee and pastries made by Sarah, I asked, "When are you ladies taking off for Europe?"

They looked at each other in confusion. "Soon, I think, Chief," Kate replied. "It's hard to plunge into something different no matter how long you've thought about it and wished for it."

Sarah nodded agreement. "There are so many things attached to it. We have to get passports, buy

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clothes, arrange for the house to be kept up. We don't know any foreign languages, and we have to put our trust into so many strangers." Sarah looked solemn. "Kate told me about your warning. I guess being rich can have its problems."

I shook my head. "Ladies, people don't have to *know* you're rich. Just travel as any average citizen. I doubt that anyone outside of California knows your name. You wouldn't have any trouble."

Sarah seemed ecstatic. "Of course, Kate, he's right, you know. We could do it, we really *could*."

Kate nodded. "And we shall."

That was how I left them. At one o'clock in the morning Doc Kilton phoned me.

"Sarah and Kate are in convulsions, Chief. One of the servants called me half an hour ago, and I've got them in the hospital having their stomachs pumped. Seems like poisoning of some kind—accidental, I'm sure. Toadstools mistaken for mushrooms or something, most likely."

I rushed to our small hospital immediately.

It was a long three hours. They couldn't save Sarah, but Kate was going to make it.

"I just don't know," Doc told me in the doctor's coffee room. "I wish I had the laboratory for this kind of thing." He looked at me. "I even have to send my cancer possibility specimens fifty miles away. I can handle cuts and breaks, births and appendicitis, give preventive shots, but anything out of the way . . ." He shook his shaggy head.

"It'll be all right, Doc," I patted his shoulder. "Give me the specimens and I'll take them to the city."

I had to stay two days in the city, which I didn't mind. It gave me a chance to roam around and be thankful I didn't have big city traffic problems. I visited the main police station and was treated nicely. I also found out I could have had the analysis on Sarah and Kate's stomach contents done for nothing instead of paying fifty dollars to the fancy private laboratory.

Anyway, the report came through and I went home and showed it to Doc Kilton.

"Do you suppose I made a mistake on Eliza and Janet?" He seemed very perturbed.

"If you did, it was a natural one," I replied. "I'll never believe any of the Chitterden girls capable of murder. They *had* to be accidents; there was absolutely no motive." I thought a few minutes. "I'm going to find out where the Chitterden money goes if all the girls die." I stormed out of Doc's office and made for Mr. London, the

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Chitterden family's old lawyer.

He'd been the town lawyer for so many years he was like the trees that get lost in the forest. Everybody knew he was there, but nobody really noticed him. I guess Doc Kilton and I fit into that category, too, as do the butcher, the hardware store man, the postman, and just about everybody who does the same thing day after day, year after year.

At first he was reluctant to disclose what he considered secret information, but when I confronted him with three deaths and one near-death, he relented.

"Chief, is it understood that this information goes no further?"

"If it involves murder, Mr. London, I can't hold it back. If it doesn't, I can promise it won't go any further." That was the best I could do. It seemed to suit him.

An hour later I understood the disposition of the Chitterden fortune. Coupled with the lab analysis, I knew I had my answer.

Miss Kate was sitting on the cement bench in the garden when I walked up the path to the house. She didn't call out to me, but I walked over and sat down beside her.

I spoke softly. "I know what has happened, Miss Kate. I know that Eliza and Janet and Sarah all died from a strong potion of oleander leaves. It's a poison that gives the symptoms of a heart attack, and therefore is not treated correctly and the patient dies."

She didn't say anything.

"I also know that you sisters did not share equally in your father's estate. Complete control was assumed by the eldest, in succession."

She sighed. "I had so hoped to fool everyone by taking a small dose myself." She grasped my hands. "Do you know what it means to live as I have the past forty-seven years? I thought when Eliza and Janet were gone that I could begin to live a life of my own. But then Sarah didn't want to leave, *and* even if she did, who wants to travel with her sister?" She put her face in her hands. The rest came through muffled. "I did so want to know the love, the arms of a man. I wanted to see the rest of the world. Chitterden isn't the beginning and the end, it it?"

She took her hands away and looked at me.

Mr. London and Doc Kilton were easily convinced of accidental death and went back to their businesses satisfied. While I admit it makes me nervous to be married to a murderess, as long as I keep her happy in our travels and in all other ways, I'm safe. However, I may take up gardening myself one of these days.

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An untimely awakening seldom proves to be a pleasurable experience.

DON'T HANG UP



by Michael Wilson

THERE was a sharp click as someone picked up the phone. "Hello." It was a girl's voice, full and rich, expectant.

"Hello, baby," Max Damon said, pulling his handkerchief tight about the receiver. "Is this Lambert 4007?"

"Yes." The voice was suddenly hesitant. She'd been called before, this girl. She knew what was coming.

"You don't know me, baby," Max said. "But I've seen you around. I thought I'd call and have a chat."

"Is this some kind of joke?" The voice was still even, still controlled.

Max laughed. "No, baby," he said softly. "This is no joke."

There was a long silence, but Max could hear her breathing. She was scared; scared as Susan had been that first time when the stranger called.

"Don't hang up, baby," Max said.

"I won't."

He could barely hear her. "You know how it is in a small town, baby," Max said. "You see a girl around and you want to get to

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know her better. How about it?"

"Look," the girl said, louder now, trying to sound as though she didn't care, "why don't you tell me your name?"

"The name wouldn't mean anything to you, baby," Max assured her. "You don't know me."

"I don't like to talk to people I don't know."

"Take it easy, baby."

She wouldn't hang up; he was sure of that. The police had issued a warning to keep the killer on the line if he phoned—keep him on the line until the call could be traced. He chuckled to himself. This was obviously a sensible girl.

Susan had been sensible. After the first call she had gone to the sheriff.

"Next time, hang up," Blaisdell had told her in his tough voice. He liked to play tough. "This isn't New York," he had said. "We don't have the gizmos to trace calls. Hang up and forget about it next time."

Max felt a twist of the old pain. Perhaps if he had been home he could have kept her alive. He should have been home. What sort of a father had he been, chasing business all over the map. Susan had been twenty-one, but a girl needs a father until she gets a husband. A girl needs someone to protect her.

He clenched his hand and pressed it against the table, softly so he would not wake the man sleeping in the house. He wondered if this girl had a father.

"Have you hung up?" she asked him. Her voice was shaking now.

"Oh, no, baby, I'm still here. You're going to be hearing a lot from me."

"What—what do you mean?"

"Just what I said, sister. Just exactly what I said, sweetheart."

"Are you threatening me?" Her control was slipping badly.

Max smiled in the dark and shifted the receiver to the other ear. She must be terrified, the way Susan had been terrified when the second call came—and the third. Terrified when she'd gone to Blaisdell again, asking for protection.

"What you need is a boyfriend, Susan." That had been his answer. "Girls get these ideas about men bothering them when they ain't got boyfriends."

An old and familiar fury set Max's heart knocking in his chest. His fist tightened around the phone. There was a faint rustling behind him, and he whirled, staring into the shadows. Silence—even the girl was silent.

It was nothing. Nothing. Better not let his nerves break now. He'd had a difficult time getting into the

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house, but, after crawling through the kitchen window, his mouth dry with fear, he had been able to find a kitchen extension when he used the pen-sized flashlight that Susan had given him for his birthday two years ago.

Susan—no more birthday presents, ever.

"What's the matter, baby?" he said. "Don't you wanta talk?"

"I don't think . . ."

"You don't have to think, honey. Let me do that. I'll do the thinking for both of us."

"You—you should see a doctor," she said unsteadily. "Get some help."

Max forced a short laugh. "Don't sweat it, baby. You're going to give me all the help I want. Lots of help."

He heard her sharp intake of breath as he lowered the receiver into its cradle. That should do it; enough time, but not too much. The man they were going to trace the call to would have been too smart to talk for too long. He would have known just how many minutes *too* long was. It had to look like a mistake on his part, an error in judgment—because the town had the right gizmos now.

After Susan had been strangled, there had been more anonymous calls, and important people had got on Blaisdell's tail, asking for protection. Blaisdell listened to important people. The tracing device was attached to the phones of those who had been called within a month.

Too late. Too late for Sue.

Everyone knew about the new equipment, and some folks thought the killer wouldn't make any more calls. But old Doc Jackman said he'd call because he wouldn't be able to help it. It was compulsive.

Max stuffed his handkerchief into his pocket. He could hear Blaisdell snoring, and he wondered if Blaisdell's pals from the station would believe him when he told them he had been asleep. Would they believe him when they found out he was alone in the house from which the call had been made?

Max pulled himself through the window and lowered it behind him just as the sirens began to sound in the distance.



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The iridescence of one's premeditations often fades to opaqueness in execution.



THE MURDERESS

A NOVELETTE

SHE HAD suffered enough. Lothario was to die.

Mona Rope purchased an inexpensive hat in a small shop, a tube of lipstick at a dime store, and the spade at a discount store. Then, moving swiftly and as if experienced in subterfuge, she walked in hot sunshine to the sedan she had rented earlier that afternoon. She appeared calm, but inside she was nervous. Now in the first critical stage of her scheme, she could not afford to be recognized by a passerby or become involved in an accident.

Her palms were moist as she drove carefully out of the business district and turned onto Riverview Boulevard. On her left, the showplace homes were spaced far apart on high, green lawns. On her right, the ground dropped sharply away to the river's edge and the occasional glimpse of a bright roof through the large trees was the only indication that below the road, set back from the water, were more showplace homes.

She turned from the boulevard into the Barnhilt driveway and inched the sedan down the steep incline to brake before the closed doors of a double garage attached to a beautiful stone house. Quickly she found the key in her purse, opened the garage door, drove the sedan inside, then began her ascent to the boulevard. Once, in a flash of envy, she paused to look back on the house. How lucky Sally Lougherty, her friend since childhood, had been to marry Hugh

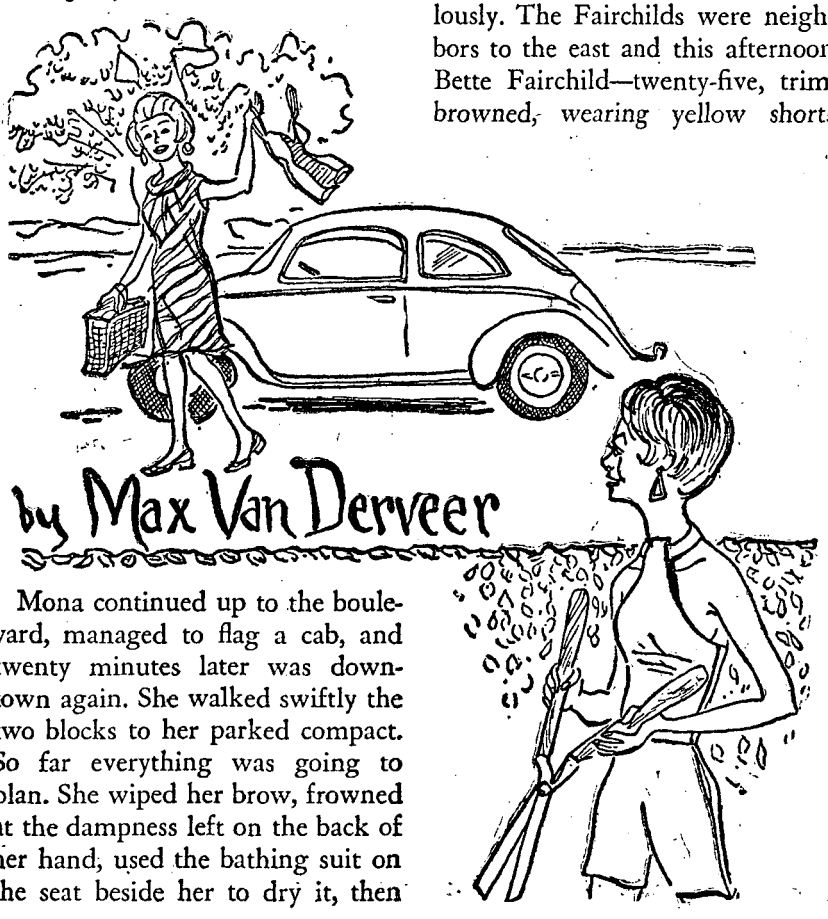
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Barnhilt! The Barnhilts were now in Europe on a summer business-vacation trip and, before leaving, Sally had insisted on the Ropes having a key to the house.

"Use it on weekends, anytime," Sally had said. "It isn't the Riviera, but it will be an escape from everyday living. You can swim, sun, host a party."

drove toward the house she had shared with Harry Rope the last sixteen years.

They were not to share much longer. The stage was set, and when Mona turned the compact into the driveway that led to a single stall garage attached to the house, she knew the first headiness of having schemed meticulously. The Fairchilds were neighbors to the east and this afternoon Bette Fairchild—twenty-five, trim, browned, wearing yellow shorts



by Max Van Derveer

Mona continued up to the boulevard, managed to flag a cab, and twenty minutes later was downtown again. She walked swiftly the two blocks to her parked compact. So far everything was going to plan. She wiped her brow, frowned at the dampness left on the back of her hand, used the bathing suit on the seat beside her to dry it, then

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and halter—was lazily using large shears on the hedge on the Fairchild side of the driveway.

Bette stopped snipping as Mona braked on the strip of yard between the drive and the house. "Hi," she said brightly when Mona had vacated the small car.

Mona resisted a snort of contempt. She managed an easy smile. "Hi."

"Hot, isn't it? Been swimming?"

It was with a great surge of carefully concealed triumph that Mona waved the swimsuit. How sweet were the spoils of forethought! Now it was assumedly established that Mona Rope had spent this warm Wednesday afternoon at a swimming pool.

"At least, Officer, Mona had a bathing suit in her hand when she arrived home about five o'clock. I saw it. She waved it at me."

Mona kept her movement casual as she went into the garage and entered the house through the utility room door, but out of Bette Fairchild's sight she became a flurry of action. Quickly she dampened the swimsuit at the kitchen sink and scurried back into the utility room to hang it. Then she risked a glance out a kitchen window. Bette Fairchild had returned to her snipping. Relief flooded Mona. She had expected inborn snoopiness to bring the little minx across the drive, and she had wanted a hanging suit to be damp to add credulity to the supposition that she had been at a pool.

She mixed a highball, lit a cigarette. Her eyes found the wall clock: five-fifteen. Approximately forty-five minutes yet before Harry's convertible would roll into the garage. She took the drink to the kitchen table, sat, crossed her knees. Her foot bobbed. She forced it to be still. The click of the air conditioner thermostat startled her. She jerked. Her foot bobbed again. She let it bob, drank, looked at the wall clock. Five-sixteen. Forty-four minutes to go. Perspiration popped from her pores. She went to the sink, dampened her brow, let the stream of water cool her wrists. Lord, why was she perspiring so profusely? The house was cool. Or did all murderers perspire in anticipation?

She mixed a second highball, making the bourbon content much larger this time. Motive was what the police would seek out first after Harry's disappearance. Why had Harry Rope—sixteen years married to the same woman, eighteen years an accountant at Piper's, the huge shoe manufacturing firm—dropped out of sight? No creditors lurked like vultures on Harry Rope's threshold. The Ropes were financially sound. There was cash

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in a bank safety deposit box, a joint checking account was reasonably healthy, and a house, its furnishings, two cars were clear of mortgage. Harry Rope did not gamble, did not drink excessively, did not spend money flagrantly. On the surface, he appeared to have been living a normal, working man's life in a conventional, respectable neighborhood with a faithful wife who, at forty and plumping slightly, still remained a statuesque, somewhat sensuously attractive blonde, certainly not a woman difficult to live with.

Well, let's examine the wife for a moment. Was there any reason Mona Rope might *drive* Harry Rope from his home? Was there any reason she might even have *killed* her husband, secreted his body, and then reported him as a missing person? Combine the cash in the safety deposit box and the joint checking account: the total would not make Mona Rope a fabulously rich widow. Life insurance? Harry Rope did not carry life insurance. So it seemed that, monetarily at least, Mona Rope did not gain by the disappearance or the death of her husband.

Now Mona grimaced and stared out the window. Bette Fairchild had quit snipping, but she remained in the yard. She was dallying and you didn't have to be a mind reader to know why. All you had to be was a wife-next-door. Harry was due home in the next five minutes.

The convertible, top down, rolled smoothly up the drive and into the garage. Then Harry and Bette Fairchild were at the hedge. Harry said something. Bette Fairchild arched her yellow halter and laughed. Harry lifted a hand in a casual wave, turned back into the garage.

Mona had a fresh drink when he entered the kitchen. Tie down, collar open, coat on a fingertip across his shoulder, short, slight, hair fashioned in a crewcut, looking much younger and healthier than his forty years, he grinned and said, "Hi, sweets. Hey, make me one of those, huh?"

She moved to comply.

"You go to the pool this afternoon?"

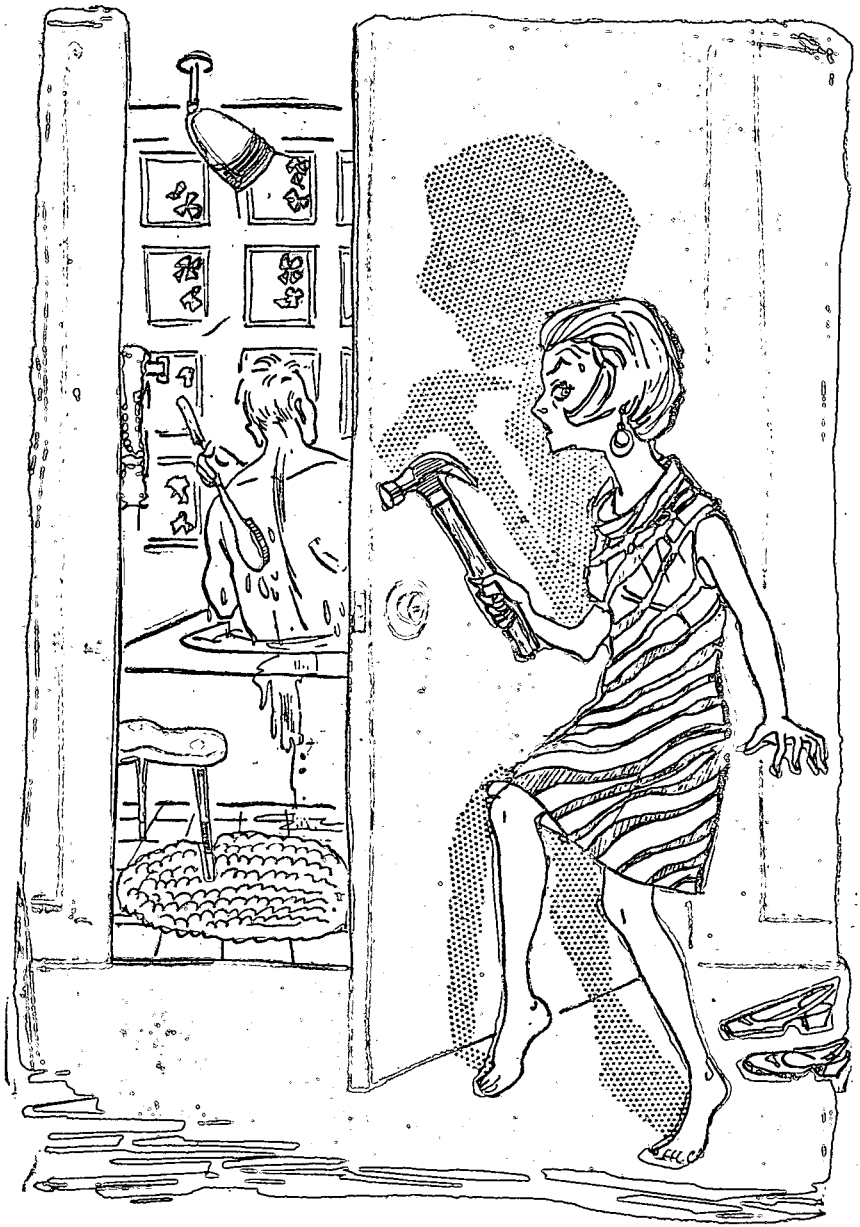
"Yes."

He was already moving out of the kitchen. "Bring the drink into the bath, will you? I sweat like a trooper today."

Habit: five minutes after Harry entered the house, winter or summer, he was in the bathtub.

Mona clenched her fists, fighting to remain calm as she waited. She listened hard. There was no sound. She frowned, cautiously entered the livingroom. Opposite her, the

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bedroom door was open. What was Harry doing? Why wasn't he running his tub? Abruptly the sound of rushing water came to her and she sagged. She did not stir until the sound ended. Harry was in the tub.

Returning to the kitchen, she took the claw hammer from a drawer, kicked off her loafers and moved into the bedroom on stealthy steps. The bathroom door was half closed. She heard her husband splashing. He would be to her left, away from the door, his back to her when she entered.

She stepped inside and brought the hammer down viciously against the top of his skull. He pitched forward, bending at the waist without a sound, and was face down in the water. She struck him several blows before she was satisfied that he was dead.

Then she heard the deep voice: "Hey, anybody home?"

She blanched, staring dumbly.

"Hey, Royce here! Harry?"

Royce Fairchild!

Mona had no sense of vacating the bathroom but suddenly she discovered she was in the bedroom, the hammer clutched in her hand. She froze. The hammer could kill her, too!

"Harry?"

Mona jammed the hammer under the pillow on her bed. Royce Fairchild's voice seemed to come from the utility room. She summoned strength and said, "Coming, Royce." She moved numbly.

He was a young, tremendously tall man with a shock of unruly black hair and in his presence Mona always felt a bit overwhelmed by that height and his aggressiveness. Now he stood grinning outside the utility room screen door and she felt like a dwarf.

"Hi," he said affably.

"I was running a tub." She tried to smile. Somehow it seemed necessary to explain why she had not answered his summons immediately.

"You and Harry got anything planned for tonight?"

"No," she managed. "That is, Harry and I don't have plans. I'm going downtown shopping this evening—the stores are open Wednesday nights, you know—and then I'm going to a late movie with a friend."

It seemed an undue amount of explanation, but Royce's grin widened. "Thought Harry and I might go over to the driving range and hit a few balls."

"Well, I . . ."

Royce Fairchild frowned quickly at her hesitation and glanced over his shoulder at the convertible. "He's here, isn't he? Bette said he drove in just ahead of me and

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I decided to run over and ask—"

"He walked down to the drugstore in the shopping center," Mona lied quickly.

"Oh?" Royce paused. "Funny I didn't see him pass the house. Well, when he gets back tell him to yell at me."

"Uh—all right." She damned the catch in her voice. It stopped Royce in his departure.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, his brow abruptly pleated.

She shook her head weakly, struggling for sane words. "I'm not . . . I'm not feeling quite up to par. Too much sun at the pool this afternoon, I guess. Royce, will you . . . will you pull down the garage door?"

"Well, sure."

"It's just that . . . well, Harry is gone and I'm alone in the house, and I feel a little more secure if the door is—"

"Sure," Royce Fairchild said. He walked out of the garage. "Tell Harry to yell."

"Yes."

Then the garage door was closed and Mona sagged against the screen door. Her heart beat furiously, her legs felt rubbery. Her excuse to get the garage door closed had been lame, but she needed the security.

She had to move the body quickly now. Royce would return. Why, oh why, had he picked this night to want Harry to go to the driving range with him?

Mona shivered, grabbed an end of the long throw rug in the utility room and ran to the bathroom. Harry's small size was another thing she had counted on, but she had difficulty rolling him from the tub. He was much heavier than she had anticipated. She flopped him on the floor and used two towels to dry him, then she rolled him onto the throw rug and piled his discarded clothing on him. She removed the wallet from his pocket, took out all of the bills, $23, and returned the wallet.

She was perspiring again, but she felt stronger. Gradually she was regaining control of herself. Using the rug as a slide, she pulled Harry through the house out into the garage where she used her set of convertible keys to open the trunk. How was she to get him inside? She now realized that he was far too heavy for her to lift as a whole.

She lifted his legs putting his heels on the bumper. That was the easy part. Straddling him, she looped her arms around his lower spine and managed to heave him upward until his hips were caught on the edge of the trunk. He was upside down on his crushed head now, cocked at a crazy angle. She

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hooked her hands under his neck, lifted and pushed him into a sitting position on the edge. Then she shoved him forward and he flopped into a folded position.

She was breathing harshly and felt as if she had run a mile race as she pitched the clothing in on top of him, closed the trunk and then spread the rug on the utility room floor again. The rug was damp but would dry quickly. Now all she had to do was kill time.

It was agonizing. The waiting allowed her to think, to conjure all kinds of situations in which she might be trapped. She forced each thought from her mind. She was worrying without cause. The only tiny hitch thus far had been Royce Fairchild appearing at the door, but that was not disastrous.

Royce telephoned a few minutes before seven o'clock. Had she forgotten to tell Harry?

"No, Royce. He hasn't come back from the drugstore. He must have stopped at the bar. Gino's."

"Guess I'll call there, Mona."

When she put the telephone together she knew she had to advance her timetable by thirty minutes. She had not planned to leave the house until seven-thirty, but if she did not leave now Royce Fairchild might return to her door and she did not think she could face him another time.

She saw Royce looking at her from a window as she backed the convertible down the driveway, and panic nicked at her. There was temptation to gun the smooth motor, get on the highway and just keep driving until she had put at least two states between herself and the city.

She gritted her teeth. She must not, she could not panic. Panic would trap her, send her to the death chamber. She forced herself to drive at a normal speed to the Barnhilt house where, braked beside the rental car inside the double garage, she transferred Harry's body and clothing to the trunk of the sedan, put the spade in the trunk, then took her other afternoon purchases to the convertible.

Downtown again, she passed a nervous hour window shopping before entering a drugstore. It was eight-thirty. She still had thirty minutes to go before picking up her friend, Pat Dodson, but perhaps Pat was already waiting.

She telephoned from a booth and Pat Dodson triggered fresh panic when she pleaded, "Mona, can we skip the movie tonight? I've been trying to call you. I have a terrible headache."

Mona's legs quivered. Pat Dodson was to be her verified alibi if the need for an alibi ever arose. "C-can't . . . you take some-

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thing?" she suggested, searching frantically for words. "Perhaps the ride downtown . . . the fresh air will help."

"Sleep, Mona is what I need. Some other night, perhaps. Maybe tomorrow night."

"No." Mona hesitated, then attempted to smooth the curtness. "I'm going tonight, Pat. I'm in the mood."

"Well, all right. But I'll have to skip."

Mona felt ill when she left the drugstore. She walked two blocks quickly, aimlessly, her thoughts scrambled. She had to get a grip on herself. She had to think. She had to improvise.

She forced herself to slow her pace, to walk with purpose. She turned a corner and moved toward the theater. Suddenly there was reprieve. She paused with the thought, then hurried to the parked convertible where she removed the two sacks from her afternoon shopping and moved off to the theater. At the ticket window, she left the package containing the tube of lipstick on the window counter and entered the theater. The ticket girl opened a door in the back of her booth and called, "Ma'am?"

Mona turned, saw the girl extending the small sack. She smiled, thanked the girl, took the sack and entered the darkness of the theater. She felt much better. Now a ticket seller would remember her.

The movie was a light comedy. Normally she would have enjoyed it, but when she walked out of the theater she discovered that what had been on the screen the last two hours was a blank. And there was more waiting ahead. Until tonight she had never realized just how nerve-wracking killing time could be.

Nervously she flicked on the convertible radio and caught a news bulletin. The city had been placed under a severe weather alert for the next six hours. She frowned. Would a storm help or hinder her?

When Mona arrived home she saw a face in a lighted window of the Fairchild house and she smiled tautly. She had wanted Bette Fairchild to know when she returned from the movie. She put the car in the garage and entered the house with her packages. Thirty minutes later she turned off all of the lights and took up a station at a dark window where she could see the Fairchild house. She occasionally caught the image of Bette. She did not see Royce. It was after one o'clock in the morning now. Why was Bette still awake? Then she remembered. Bette Fairchild had an innate fear of storms and never

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retired if there were a chance of weather violence.

Mona pondered this twist of fate. She could not have Bette see her leave the house. And if there were violence, would the Fairchilds expect to see light in the Ropes' house during the storm?

Mona eased out the front door and through the shadows until she had the house between herself and any inquiring eyes that might peer from a Fairchild window. Then she crossed the yard and was on the sidewalk. Walking swiftly, she studied the sky anxiously. There were stars. Perhaps there would not be a storm.

She found a cab with a sleeping driver at the all-night stand in the shopping center and made what she fervently hoped was not too obvious an effort to shield her face as she ducked into the shadow of the back seat. Her spirits lifted slightly. The driver was so sleepy he gave her only a brief, over-the-shoulder glance as she spoke a Riverview Boulevard address. At the destination she gave him the correct amount for the fare plus a fifty cent tip, then started bravely up a walk toward a dark house while he drove away. When she was sure she no longer existed for the driver, she returned to the boulevard, crossed it and went down the Barnhilt driveway.

She had selected Harry's burial plot weeks before during one of his whims, a pioneering Sunday afternoon drive into the country. The drive had taken them off a highway and down a narrow lane through trees and into a shallow ravine where the lane had ended abruptly.

Now the headlights of the rental car pierced the dark night as Mona eased along to the lane's end. She put out the lights and sat for a few moments breathing deeply while her eyes adjusted to the dark. Then she dug the shallow grave and rolled her husband and his clothing into it. Far away, back in the direction of the city, there was a flash of lightning and a faint roll of thunder. She shoveled swiftly as a new thought struck her. Tire tracks could be left in wet ground. She had to be on the highway before the rain came.

The car creaked and snapped protestingly as she bounced back along the lane. Easy, she told herself, take it easy. This is no time to have a breakdown, not out here in the middle of nowhere.

Mona drew a deep breath and increased her speed when she turned onto the highway. The storm was closer now. Lightning flashed often, jagged streaks of brilliance crossing the black sky. She saw the river bridge ahead.

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There were no headlights following or approaching and she felt exhilaration as she drove onto the bridge and stopped. Quickly she left the sedan and pitched the spade over the railing. The dome the city lights made against the stormy sky was only two miles ahead now. Satisfied, she rolled toward it—and then her heart lurched.

There were other lights ahead where lights should not exist. They seemed to block the highway, and there was an eerie red beacon whirling against the night.

Police! Somehow she had been discovered and now the police were waiting for her return to the city!

She applied the brakes. Her eyes searched for a side road.

But how could the police have discovered her so quickly? She struggled for rationalization. They couldn't have! It had to be an accident ahead! That was it, someone had had a wreck.

She allowed the car to roll slowly. A uniformed man materialized in the headlights. He stood on the shoulder of the road and used a red light to motion her forward. Now she saw that only one side of the highway was blocked—traffic coming out of the city was stopped. Another red flashlight motioned to her to keep moving. She rolled through the roadblock and into the city. Lightning flashed and thunder cracked. She wanted to stop, catch her breath, allow her heart to settle, but she kept on, to the downtown theater parking lot she had selected earlier. Two blocks away was the car rental agency; at the next corner was a cab stand. She left the car in the lot and found a cab to take her to the shopping center complex. A blast of wind swirled debris along the street and the first drops of rain began to splatter the sidewalk as she paid her fare. She dog-trotted the three blocks to her house. Rain came down in a gush just as she slid through the front door. She collapsed in a deep chair. She suddenly was bone-weary, and felt as if she could sleep for a week.

But sleep would not come. She was too tied up in knots. There was too much behind her, too much ahead. She went through the darkness to the kitchen where she looked out the window and saw the lights in the Fairchild house. Bette Fairchild was riding out the storm now. Should she also pretend she had been awakened? She reached for a light switch, then gasped at her near error. If Bette Fairchild looked out a window, looked in at her, saw her fully clothed . . .

Mona changed into pajamas and a robe and remembered the ham-

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mer under the pillow. Forcing herself to be calm, she took the hammer to the kitchen and put it in a drawer. Then she snapped on the light, lit a cigarette. Let Bette Fairchild look now. The only thing she would see was another woman who had been disturbed by the storm.

Mona made coffee and killed the next four hours smoking cigarettes and sipping from a cup while she listened to the violence outside. The storm finally subsided around seven o'clock in the morning, became a gentle rain. A few minutes before eight o'clock, she heard Royce Fairchild drive away from the house next door. She forced herself to wait another twenty minutes before she dressed and left in the convertible. She saw Bette Fairchild watching her from a window. She drove to the theater parking lot, transferred to the rental car. This all seemed so detailed but it was the details that were to prevent discovery. Returning the rental car to the agency at 3:30 a.m. would have given her identity; returning it at 9:20 a.m. would not.

The attendant was a wide-shouldered, sloppy man who looked as if he did not bathe. "Get all of the use out of it you needed, lady?"

Mona managed calmness. "Yes." She paid and started out of the office.

Then the man yelled after her, "Hey, wait a sec, lady! You got any idea where you might've lost the hubcap?"

Mona forced herself to stop and turn. The man was squatted beside the right front wheel of the car and peering at her hard. There was no hubcap on the wheel.

Mona said nothing. Her tongue seemed stuck to the roof of her mouth. Where had she lost the hubcap? At the grave? Somewhere along the rough lane? In the theater parking lot?

"Do . . . do you . . . want me to pay for it?" she asked.

The man's eyes flicked over her. He seemed to debate. Suddenly his thin lips twisted to one side, and he muttered, "Naw, you don't hafta pay. We got insurance."

Mona left the agency woodenly, returned to the convertible and drove to the shopping center supermarket where she made several purchases without thinking. Then she was home again and had the large grocery sack in the kitchen. She wanted to scream. She had to get a grip on herself. She poured coffee with a shaking hand, sipped. Everything still was going smoothly in spite of the lost hubcap, and she still had one more detail to take care of before she summoned the police. It was 10:40 in the morning now, time she telephoned Piper's.

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The voice at Piper's was curious. No, Mr. Rope had not come in to the office this morning and Mr. Rope's absence was unusual. Mr. Rope never missed work without calling. Was there anything that could be done from Piper's?

There was nothing.

Mona telephoned the police department and asked for the Missing Persons Bureau. The voice on the other end of the line was bored and guardedly suggested that perhaps her husband would be coming home any minute now. Perhaps she had been emotionally upset by the storm and—

"This just isn't like Harry, Officer!"

"Well now, I guess we could send someone out there if you really think—"

"Will you? Please?"

They sent a sergeant named Banks. He surprised Mona. He was young, probably thirty, but he seemed to understand her plight. She decided she liked him as he asked questions. He took down a detailed description of Harry and then told her not to worry. Her husband probably would show up.

Twenty minutes after the sergeant had left the house Bette Fairchild was in the kitchen with Mona. She looked haggard, but she was curious and excited. "That car out front a few minutes ago! It looked so official! Are you okay?"

Mona explained.

Bette appeared shocked. "Harry didn't come home all night?

"He left the house right after coming from work, saying he was going to the drugstore. I haven't seen him since."

"Well, where could he be?"

"I don't know, Bette."

"Have you called his office?"

Mona felt a twinge of satisfaction. "Yes, right after I returned from the market this morning. I didn't want to . . . to call too early. I didn't want to spread a false alarm."

"Golly," breathed Bette, "everything is happening at once! A storm, the bank burglary, and now Harry—"

"Bank burglary?"

"Haven't you been listening to the radio? One of the downtown banks was robbed during the night. There are roadblocks set up all around the city and . . ."

The remainder of Bette Fairchild's words were lost on Mona. She felt an urge to laugh when she thought back on her near panic at the roadblock.

Bette asked, "Mona, why would Harry just up and disappear?"

Sergeant Banks returned the next day and asked the same question. Then, when she did not have an answer, he became blank-faced and

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said, "You know, of course, Mrs. Rope, your husband has been seeing other women."

Mona acted appropriately shocked.

"Young women," said Sergeant Banks. "Most seemed to be or have been employed at Piper's."

Mona became indignant.

"It's one of the first things we check in this kind of case," said Sergeant Banks. "Finances, marital happiness—"

Mona displayed anger. "Our finances are in order!"

"Yes."

"And Harry never would—"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Rope," the sergeant interrupted. He seemed to be a man who anticipated. "Our investigation shows that your husband has been keeping company with a number of young women over a period of many months."

Mona became the softly crying, scorned wife until Sergeant Banks left the house, then she went into the kitchen, poured coffee into her empty cup, added a lace of bourbon and silently toasted a dead husband: Cheers, Lothario!

Saturday, Sergeant Banks unloaded a bomb. A preliminary audit of Harry's books at Piper's—it was routine when an accountant disappeared—had revealed what seemed to be a misappropriation of funds.

"H-how much is missing?" Mona asked.

"It looks like about $10,000."

"And you think Harry has run off with—"

"None of his recent women acquaintances are missing, but the money is."

"I see," said Mona. And she also saw how Harry Rope had been able to afford his women through the months. Then she looked the sergeant straight in the eye. "This is a terrible shock, of course."

He said nothing.

"I wonder . . ." She hesitated. The sergeant waited. "Well, I wonder if it would be out of line if I left the city for a while? Say a week? There will be publicity in the newspapers, I imagine. There is when money, and a man, is missing and I think . . . well, I'd just like to be alone somewhere."

"Any particular place in mind, Mrs. Rope? We might need to be in touch."

"Are you familiar with Lake Charles?"

"Yes."

"There's a lodge there. Harry and I once . . . Well, never mind. There is a lodge, Shady Oaks."

"All right, Mrs. Rope."

"I can go?"

"Yes."

She drove out of the city that afternoon and was only twenty

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miles along the highway when her suspicion was confirmed. At Shady Oaks she found her police shadow to be a young man who was equally at home on a beach or in the cocktail lounge. Then on Monday afternoon he dropped all pretense, approached her boldly and said they would have to return to the city.

"Do you mean because I haven't met Harry with his $10,000?" she asked caustically.

"Your husband has been found, Mrs. Rope. I'm afraid he was murdered."

Two policemen questioned her at headquarters. Sergeant Banks introduced the second policeman as a Lieutenant Poling, a rangy, mild-mannered man, who asked her politely to recall her whereabouts the night her husband had walked away from the house. She did, and was pleased with herself. She knew her story would be checked and verified. Bette Fairchild would testify that she had come home from swimming at a municipal pool around five o'clock that Wednesday afternoon and Royce Fairchild would tell them when she had driven away from the house. Then Pat Dodson could recount begging off of a movie date and a ticket seller, her memory properly jostled, would remember a woman who had left a package after purchasing a theater ticket. Bette could account for the early morning hours when Mona had arrived home from the movie, when the storm had hit the city, the lights in the Rope house next door.

Mona was relaxed when Lieutenant Poling nodded and said gently, "You understand, Mrs. Rope, we have to question you."

"Certainly. There is the missing money. After all, I could have known Harry was stealing it."

"It is why we allowed you to go to Lake Charles," said Sergeant Banks.

"You thought I could be meeting Harry somewhere. I didn't know about the money, Sergeant. That was a shock."

"We think we know where most of it was spent," put in Lieutenant Poling.

"On Harry's . . . *girls,* you mean," said Mona.

He nodded. "We are working on the theory that one of them—some girl—hammered him to death."

Mona did not move.

"Can you take a rather brutal story, Mrs. Rope?"

She was not conscious of nodding but the lieutenant continued: "Our version of last Wednesday night is, your husband left the house on the pretext of going to the drugstore. Either by prearrangement or by chance he met a

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girl. They spent the evening together. Sometime during the evening the girl struck him down with a blunt instrument, probably a hammer. We won't know why until we find her. Then she took his body out of the city and buried it. He was nude when we unearthed him, but his clothing was in the grave. So was his wallet. It was empty."

"L-lieutenant," Mona stuttered, "you haven't told me just how . . . just how you found Harry."

"A kid's curiosity," he said grimly, "about a hubcap. A curious boy was prowling the countryside and found a shiny hubcap in some weeds in a ravine. Then he saw what looked like a fresh grave. He dug into the grave with his hands until he turned up a foot. Naturally, it frightened him."

"A . . . hubcap?" she murmured.

"We'd like to find the car it belonged on," he said flatly.

"C-can you?"

"That, unfortunately, Mrs. Rope, is like expecting to find a given wiener in a hot dog stand."

"But . . . but if you did find it?"

"We think we might have our girl."

The days passed excruciatingly slowly. Mona buried Harry again and there was newspaper sensationalism over Harry being found in a shallow grave, the police search for a car that had lost a hubcap, the money Harry was supposed to have stolen, her own picture in the paper. And there were Bette and Royce Fairchild, Bette's unrestrained excitement and Royce's genuine concern. But there was growing security, too, in each passing day. The police were getting nowhere in their investigation. Mona almost felt smug—until a new menace suddenly loomed.

He appeared on her doorstep with an evening light behind him. Wide in the shoulders, sloppy in dress, his mouth smirked behind a new cigar and his eyes inventoried boldly. There was a car in the driveway.

Mona feigned nonrecognition of both the man and the car. "Yes?" she said.

"Come off it, dolly. Name's Fred Taylor. You remember me—and the car you see parked out there."

She blanched against his bluntness.

"Look, I coulda run to the cops. I coulda told them a story about a dame who brings in a heap she's rented—minus a hubcap."

"Mr. Taylor, I—"

"Your picture was in the newspaper, dolly. So was a lot of other interesting things, like the hubcap thing—and like ten thousand

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smacks your sly old man heisted!"

Fred Taylor pushed inside, went to a deep chair and sat. "Unlax, baby," he said. "Sit. We gotta talk."

"About what?" Mona snapped.

"The ten grand, that's what, honey. Five of it will keep my yap shut. That's just half. I'm bein' generous." He sucked on the cigar. "Look," he said, feigning patience, "I know how these things work. The wifey gets hubby to steal from the joint where he works. A nice little nest egg is put together. Then one day wifey says, 'Come on, hubby, let's go to South America.' Only hubby don't get out the door. Wifey clonks him on the noggin. Wifey is going alone."

"That's fantastic!"

"Is it?" Fred Taylor laughed without humor. Suddenly his face darkened. "Honey, I ain't got time to fool. I want five thou or I go to the cops!"

"Mr. Taylor, please . . ." Mona searched frantically for direction and words. This couldn't be happening to her! "Mr. T-Taylor," she heard herself repeat, "would you . . . would you care for a drink? I have to . . . well, collect myself."

He seemed surprised, but he also seemed to consider it. His eyes roved over her and he suddenly beamed. "Well now, dolly, that sounds better. You want to be friendly, huh? I guess I got time for that."

Mona went into the kitchen. He trailed her. She was frightened but she needed time to think. She had to rid herself of this menace. She got out the bottle of bourbon. He commented, "Good booze." Mona took two glasses from the cupboard, opened the ice compartment of the refrigerator. The cube tray was stuck. She struggled with it, then Fred Taylor was against her back and she wanted to scream at the touch of him, but he said, "Let me get them cubes, dolly. Hey, you got a lotta curves!"

She attempted to dip out from in front of him, but he caught her shoulders, bent to kiss her. She twisted her head. His mouth crossed her cheek and the smell of him was foul. Reflexively, she slammed her palms against his chest. He grunted and, surprisingly, released her. He glowered, his breathing heavy.

"Okay, dolly, so your kind of friendliness I can do without. But the dough I want! Get it!"

She stood numbed, wagging her head.

He caught her shoulders, shook her viciously. "You got it, honey! You got it someplace in this joint!"

"Th-the . . . car," she whispered.

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He stopped shaking, stared at her, and she moved mechanically, stepping around him, going through the utility room and out into the garage. She was functioning blindly. She did not know why she was in the garage unless it was a frantic effort to find a weapon. She needed something with which to fend him off, to rid herself of him. Was there such a weapon in the garage?

Her eyes searched without seeing, and then he was beside her, rasping, "The car. Okay. So?"

"Th-the trunk . . ." She found keys in her pocket, opened the trunk. It gaped back at her, the jack and lug wrench scattered on its floor.

"Baby—".

He cut off his words as she crawled into the trunk of the convertible and wrenched at the lining behind the back seat. She tugged. The lining would not give. Wasn't he going to help? Wasn't his greed to rule? She had to get him inside the trunk so she could slam the lid on him.

Then his hands were on her hips and he had yanked her out of the trunk and slammed her up against the garage door.

"The dough's in there, baby?" he said harshly. "Behind the lining?"

She nodded woodenly.

He peered into the trunk, crawled inside, was on his knees, tearing at the lining. The tire wrench loomed at her. She stepped forward, snatched it up, dug it into Fred Taylor's middle. He grunted and jerked. His head slammed against the trunk door. She brought the wrench around in a sweeping stroke and slammed it across the back of his thighs. He cried out and pitched forward, cursed, and was coming out when she brought the wrench down hard against his face. Panic ruled her then. She continued to beat his head until she knew he was dead.

She pitched the wrench in on top of him, slammed the trunk and sagged against it. Her breathing was in gasps and she felt as if all of her strength had been drained from her, but it was done. The man inside the trunk no longer could condemn her.

Mona staggered into the house and attempted to organize her thoughts. She had to rid herself of Fred Taylor's body. The river seemed a logical place. Was there a lonely stretch of river bank somewhere?

The sound of the front door bell brought a terrified yelp from her before she stood frozen, fingers against her cheek. She struggled for composure. Could she ignore the summons? The bell sounded again. She decided she could not.

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She breathed deeply, gritted her teeth, and went to the front door. When she opened it, she cut off the scream only by clamping her jaws.

Sergeant Banks frowned. "Evening, Mrs. Rope. Is something wrong?"

She struggled for composure. "No," she said, her voice breaking. "It's just that—" She cut off the words. "You surprised me, that's all. I expected someone else."

"Oh?" He let it hang.

She indicated the car parked in the driveway. "There was a man here a few moments ago. A salesman. Not a very pleasant salesman. I sent him away, and when you rang I thought . . . well, I thought he had returned. I was prepared to give him a piece of my mind."

"He must still be in the neighborhood," said the sergeant. "That's a funny place to park. I'd say he took a liberty. He should have parked at the curb."

"He'll probably be leaving the area soon," Mona said. "Was there . . . is there something?"

"I wonder, Mrs. Rope, if I might have a drink of water?"

"Wha . . . Why, yes, certainly."

She took him into the kitchen, pondering this sudden and strange request, and got the glass of water. He drank, thanked her, then returned to the front door where he looked out at the car in the driveway again. "Do you want me to find that salesman and have him move his car?"

"No," Mona said, feeling as if she were going to explode. "No . . . it's . . . all right where it is."

"Well, good night, Mrs. Rope. I'll be in touch."

"Good night, Sergeant."

She watched him cross to the car in the drive. He opened the door, looked at the registrations, then went on to the street and looked in both directions. Finally he got into a black sedan at the curb and drove away.

There was only one course of action. *She* had to drive away from the house. If the sergeant were waiting somewhere for a man to leave, he would not follow her. He would remain, watch the car in the driveway. Well, he could remain all night. The rental car would not be moved, and tomorrow she would stick with her story. A salesman had parked in her driveway, a salesman had come to her door, she had sent the salesman away; she assumed he had gone off to make other calls in the neighborhood, she did not know why he had not returned for his car.

Mona backed the convertible from the garage, maneuvered around the car in the driveway by backing across the front yard, and

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then was at the street entry when the black sedan eased in behind her and forced her to brake.

Sergeant Banks came to her open window. "Where is your boyfriend, Mrs. Rope?" he asked, stone faced.

She gripped the steering wheel hard. "Sergeant, you're . . . confusing me."

"There isn't any salesman in the neighborhood, Mrs. Rope. And that's a rental car in your drive. I think there was a man hiding in your house. Infidelity is not practiced solely by men, you know. Is it possible you have had a lover for a long time? Is it also possible you and your lover planned your husband's death? Is it possible your lover executed the plan? These questions are clogging my mind, Mrs. Rope."

"Sergeant," she gasped, "you absolutely shock me! I can call your superior! I can—"

"Yes, Mrs. Rope," he interrupted, "you do that. You telephone Lieutenant Poling and tell him—"

"Oh, Sergeant, this is absurd!" She vacated the car.

"Your car keys, please."

"What?" Mona screeched wildly.

Sergeant Banks was scrutinizing the convertible minutely, and Mona's heart beat hard. Was there blood leaking from the trunk? She didn't remember blood when Fred Taylor had died . . .

"The keys, Mrs. Rope?" Sergeant Banks extended a palm and waited.

Confused, Mona shook her head. "I . . . I don't understand."

"There's the possibility you are sneaking your boyfriend away from the house," he said. "He could be hiding in the trunk. He could return later for the car."

Mona screamed and turned to run, but Sergeant Banks was quick. He caught her wrist and slammed her body up against the convertible, pinning her with his weight. Then he reached through the open window, wrenched the key from the ignition switch, and took Mona to the back of the car. He found the trunk key, inserted it in the lock.

When the lid swung up he cursed, and Mona Rope collapsed in the street.



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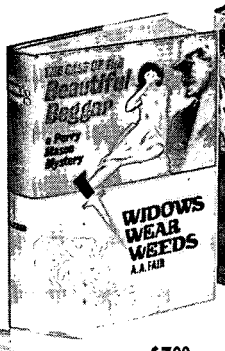
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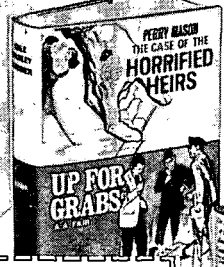


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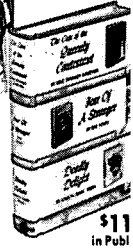


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